



# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

or AWAKENED INDIA

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COVER: 'Panchabhutas: the five elements',  
by Sanyogita Hade

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# TRADITIONAL WISDOM

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत । *Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!*

## Mahābhūtāni: *The Elements*

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आकाशो वाव तेजसो भूयानाकाशे वै सूर्याचन्द्रमसावुभौ विद्युन्नक्षत्राण्यग्निरा-  
काशेनाह्वयत्याकाशेन शृणोत्याकाशेन प्रतिशृणोत्याकाशे रमत आकाशे न रमत  
आकाशे जायत आकाशमभिजायत आकाशमुपास्वेति ॥

Akasha (space) indeed is greater than fire. Both the sun and the moon, light-  
ning, stars, and fire exist in Akasha. One calls through Akasha, hears (the call)  
through Akasha, hears another call back through Akasha. In Akasha we re-  
joice (when we are together) and in Akasha we rejoice not (when separated).  
In Akasha is everything born, towards Akasha all things grow. Meditate on  
Akasha. *(Chhandogya Upanishad, 7.12.1)*

वात आ वातु भेषजं शंभु मयोभु नो हृदे । प्र ण आयूषि तारिषत् ॥  
उत वात पितासि न उत भ्रातोत नः सखा । स नो जीवातवे कृधि ॥  
यददो वात ते गृहेऽमृतस्य निधिर्हितः । ततो नो देहि जीवसे ॥

May Vata (Vayu, the wind) breathe into our hearts a healing balm, filling it  
with joy; may he prolong our lives. You are our father, O Vata, our brother  
and our friend; give us life that we may live. From the store of ambrosia stored  
in your abode, O Vata, give us that we may live. *(Rig Veda, 10.186)*

त्वामग्न ऋतायवः समीधिरे प्रत्नं प्रत्नास ऊतये सहस्कृत ।  
पुरुश्चन्द्रं यजतं विश्वधायसं दमूनसं गृहपतिं वरेण्यम् ॥

It was you, Agni (fire), the manifester of strength, whom the ancients, ob-  
servers of cosmic law, enkindled for their preservation: shining, adorable, all-  
sustaining, benevolent, master of the household, worthy of worship. *(5.8.1)*

अप्सु मे सोमो अन्नवीदंतर्विश्वानि भेषजा । अग्निं च विश्वशंभुवमापश्च विश्वभेषजीः ॥  
Within Apah (the waters)—Soma has told me—are all medicines that heal,  
and also Agni, who blesses all. The waters contain all medicines. *(1.23.20)*

विश्वंभरा वसुधानी प्रतिष्ठा हिरण्यवक्षा जगतो निवेशनी ।  
वैश्वानरं बिभ्रती भूमिरग्निमिन्द्रऋषभा द्रविणे नो दधातु ॥

Bearer of all things, hoard of treasures rare, golden-breasted sustainer, repose  
of the animate, bearer of the universal fire, whose spouse is Indra—may the  
Earth (Prithvi, Bhumi) grant us wealth. *(Atharva Veda, 12.1.6)*

# THIS MONTH

The focus of this number is on **Minding Our Environment**, on what the Ramakrishna Order and some related agencies have been doing to foster a healthy environment, and how we could all participate in this process.

**Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago** provides an interesting analysis of ‘Civilisation’, Eastern and Western.



The Medinipur demand-driven sanitation programme has set a benchmark in rural sanitation for all developing countries. This re-

markable story is narrated in **Sanitation as a Movement: the RKM Lokasiksha Parishad Experience**, by Swami Asaktanandaji, Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narendrapur, and Sri Chandi Charan Dey, Project Coordinator, Water and Sanitation, Ramakrishna Mission Lokasiksha Parishad, Narendrapur

**Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith: Focus on Environment** provides an interesting look into the fascinating world of applied fungal and algal research, besides a report on the Viveka Nature Club. This paper has been jointly authored by Dr V V Subramanian, Dr T S Suryanarayanan, Dr V Sivasubramanian, Dr S Swaminathan, and Dr K Kannan, all of Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda College, Chennai.

How do we get away from the feverish consumerism, busyness, fear, and noise that overwhelm us; and is such an escape worthwhile? Mrs Janice Thorup, a writer and social worker from St Louis, provides answers in **A Quiet and Peaceful Life**.

Dr Suruchi Pande, Researcher in Sanskrit, Jnanaprabodhini Institute, Pune, is known to our readers for



her interest in birds. This time she tells us about **Ulūka—the Owl in Sanskrit Literature**.

The fifth instalment of Mrs Alice M Hansbrough's **Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda** focuses on Swamiji's stay at the Turk Street flat in San Francisco. The transcript of these reminiscences has been made available by the Vedanta Society of Northern California. The text has been edited by Swami Chetanandaji, Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society of St Louis, and a group of Vedanta students.

Swami Nirvikalpanandaji, Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Kishanpur, has provided valuable hints on **Household Waste Disposal and Urban Domestic Farming** for our readers.

**Signs of Hope: Countering Tsunami Effects through Natural Processes** is a remarkable account of the use of organic farming methods in restoring soil fertility following the tsunami of 2004. M Revathi, the author, is Secretary, Tamilnadu Organic Farmers Movement (TO-FarM), Nagapattinam.



Dr Prema Nandakumar, researcher and literary critic, Srirangam, captures the antiquity of the rich Jain tradition of Kanchipuram in the second instalment of **Kanchipuram, the Four-fold Glory**.


## ***Minding Our Environment***

**C**AT lovers would not be unfamiliar with the following scenario: A young kitten walks across a clean porch and down the doorsteps leading to the sandy courtyard. Crouching on its haunches, it releases a small pellet of excrement, flicks some sand over with its hind limbs to cover the filth, turns round and sniffs the tiny heap to make sure things are well covered, piles up some more sand to satisfy itself, and then moves back into the house with tottering steps.

The recent report of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has this to say about the possible future impact of global warming on Asia: Glacier melt in the Himalayas is projected to increase flooding and rock avalanches from destabilized slopes, and to affect water resources within the next two to three decades. This will be followed by decreased river flows as the glaciers recede. Fresh-water availability in Central, South, East, and Southeast Asia, particularly in large river basins, is projected to decrease due to climate change, which, along with population growth and increasing demand arising from higher standards of living, could adversely affect more than a billion people by the 2050s. Coastal areas, especially heavily-populated mega-delta regions in South, East, and Southeast Asia, will be at greatest risk due to increased flooding from the sea and, in some mega-deltas, flooding from the rivers. Climate change is projected to impinge on sustainable development of most developing countries of Asia, as it compounds the pressures on natural resources and the environment associated with rapid urbanization, industrialization, and economic development. It is projected that crop yields could increase up to 20% in East and Southeast Asia while they could decrease up to 30% in Central and South Asia by the mid-21st

century. Taken together and considering the influence of rapid population growth and urbanization, the risk of hunger is projected to remain very high in several developing countries. Endemic morbidity and mortality due to diarrhoeal disease primarily associated with floods and droughts are expected to rise. ... Increases in coastal water temperature would exacerbate the abundance and/or toxicity of cholera in South Asia.

The apocalyptic threat of global warming calls for urgent governmental legislation, corporate resolve, and mass action to cut down industrial and vehicular emissions as well as individual carbon footprints. What does our tiny kitten have to do with all this? Not much, apparently. But it does remind us of the fact that more than a billion people across the globe have no access to safe drinking water and almost two million children die every year for want of clean water and sanitation facilities. Eighty per cent of rural Indian households still lack toilet facilities, and this has direct relation to the fact that three-quarters of Indian infants and toddlers are anaemic.

Even without global warming, we are caught up in an environmental crisis of colossal proportions, which often fails to stir us up simply because of its ubiquity. Our little kitten reminds us that we have allowed our instinct for personal and social hygiene to be hijacked by the pressures of population, poverty, and socioeconomic inequities. It also makes us aware that small eco-friendly steps add up to giant ecological leaps. Making our local surroundings hygienic and pollution-free, disposing of waste safely and recycling judiciously, and eco-friendly farming—each of these efforts is born of an eco-sensitive attitude, and it is this attitude that is responsible for global environmental health. It is this mindset that we need to cultivate. 

# Prabuddha Bharata—100 years ago

*Civilisation: June 1907*

**T**HE key-note of modern civilisation is ... material prosperity and intellectual eminence. In advancing the knowledge of the grand physical laws governing the universe, as well as improving the material condition of mankind from a stage almost on a level with the brute, to that in which we find so much culture and refinement, it has no doubt greatly served the cause of true progress. ...

It would be idle to deny that this picture has a dark side; that modern civilisation, while it has conferred some of the greatest boons on mankind, has at the same time brought in its train certain grave evils, mostly moral, the gravity of which cannot be over-estimated. The tendencies to subordinate the spiritual to the physical, as well as to sacrifice "moralisation to intellectualisation," have entered as threads through the whole fabric of modern civilisation and affected its texture and pattern in marked ways. They constitute, so to say, the dross and alloy that gives modern civilisation its unsound ring. ...

Neither the defunct moral civilisation of the East, nor the present material civilisation of the West, represents real progress. Progress, you may call either, but both are examples of erratic progress. As Buckle has well said,—“there can be no doubt that people are not really advancing if, on the one hand, their increasing ability is accompanied by increasing vice, or if, on the other hand, while they are becoming more virtuous, they likewise become more ignorant. This double movement, moral and intellectual, is essential to the very idea of civilisation and includes the entire theory of mental progress.” Applying this criterion to the two forms of civilisation we are considering, we see that neither comes up to the requisite level,—both the East and the West having been swept off their feet in the mill-race of human progress. Else how is it that the East, forgetting the grand lessons of Karma and *Veeradharma* inculcated by its ideal teacher, Sree

Krishna, has drunk so plentifully of the sleepy drench of lethargy and over-sentimentalism and has become a veritable race of lotus-eaters? How is it again, that the West, oblivious of the sweet message of meekness and Universal Love preached by its Messiah, impelled by an insatiable earth-hunger and intoxicated with an intense desire for self-aggrandisement, is using its knowledge of physical laws, not so much in an attempt to know Him Whose glories those laws declare, as in conquering, riding roughshod over, and sometimes annihilating, His images on earth?

... When all the advantages derived from those two revolutionising agents,—I mean steam and electricity—as well as all the discoveries and inventions and all the ‘ologies’ that modern civilisation has given us, are arrayed against the dread foes of humanity, atheism and the minor ‘isms’ and evils enumerated above, the first impulse produced in our mind is one of distinct pessimism. But when we again remember that a Higher Power, and All-Wise and All-merciful Providence, is watching over and guiding our destinies, the truth of the eternal law of progress comes home to our mind again. We can then realise that ... there will come an era when there will be no undue development of materialism at the cost of spiritualism or of intellectualisation at the cost of moralisation, and *vice versa*. Then the selfishness, hypocrisy and the other evils that cling fungus-like to the material civilisation of the West, as also, the lethargy and over-sentimentalism characterising the moral civilisation of the East, will disappear, and the two streams, purged of all their base and progress-retarding elements, will, like the Ganges and the Jamuna, ‘commingle their limpid and holy waters and unite their waves in one merry march to the azure’ deep of ideal civilisation, a civilisation befitting the higher type of beings, that God has destined us to be.

M. N. BANNERJEE



# ***Sanitation as a Movement: The RKM Lokasiksha Parishad Experience***

**Swami Asaktananada and Chandi Charan Dey**

SOME of the most dramatic advances in public health and life expectancy have resulted from universal dissemination of sanitary practices and universal access to safe drinking water. Developed nations have been able to virtually eliminate many infectious diseases like cholera and polio through these means. Availability of sanitary facilities is therefore one of the important indicators of quality of life. But, surprisingly, in India, household sanitation was never perceived as a priority, especially in rural areas. Even in the early 1990s it was given little importance in India's development plans. The Central Rural Sanitation Programme (CRSP) was conceived merely as one of many programmes, consisting in the construction of a few thousand household toilets in various parts of the country. The programme was totally allocation-based and depended on departmentally implemented activities aimed at achieving set targets. Its targets were determined not by the needs of the country but by the availability of government funds and subsidies.

It was assumed by planners and policy makers that high rates of subsidy would create demand for household toilets, but such thinking was strategically weak. The yearly demand for household toilets actually turned out to be only a very small fraction of the total number of households without toilet facilities. As a result, household toilet coverage in rural areas remained marginal. In 1991, only 10 per cent of rural Indian households had access to sanitary toilets. Moreover, the use rate of sanitary toilets was also very poor. Several studies noted that over 50 per cent of the sanitary toilets constructed under various government programmes in the 1980s were not being used.

The reasons were many: lack of awareness about the need for and proper use of toilets, poor construction standards, low sanitary coverage in the community, lack of regular water supply, lack of participatory involvement in the programme on the part of beneficiaries, and so on. Government-run sanitation programmes also failed to develop working collaborations with the beneficiary population and the local government and non-government agencies—including panchayati-raj institutions (PRIs), the community network of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), and research and development institutes—which are crucial to the success of any community-based project.

With the growing realization of the weaknesses in government-operated sanitation programmes, various experiments at improving the success of this programme were carried out in the country during the late 1980s. Ramakrishna Mission Lokasiksha Parishad, Narendrapur, conceived a demand-driven and people-centred sanitation programme in the Medinipur district of West Bengal in collaboration with UNICEF. In 1991 Medinipur was the most

*Mass production of toilets in rural Medinipur*



populous district of the country, with a population of 8.3 million. [Presently Medinipur has been divided into two districts—East and West Medinipur.] Nearly one percent of Indians live in Medinipur.

### **Ramakrishna Mission Lokasiksha Parishad (RKMLP)**

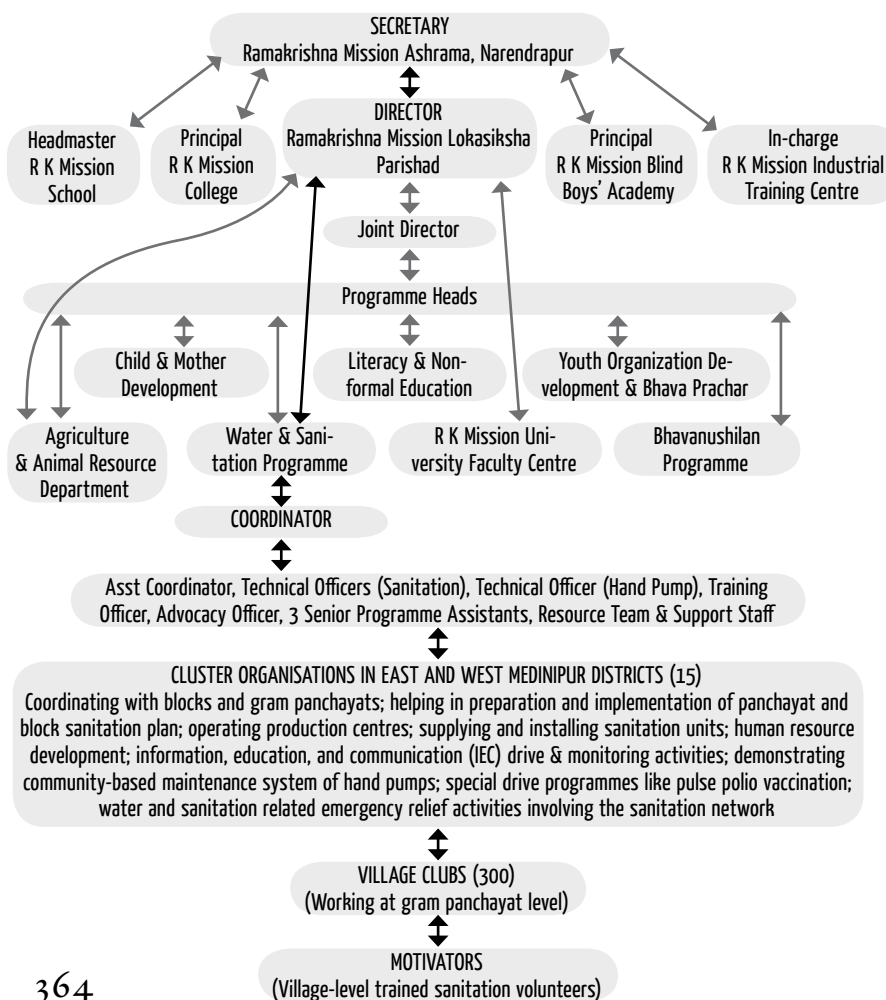
Ramakrishna Mission Lokasiksha Parishad is an important unit of the Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narendrapur (a branch of Ramakrishna Mission, Belur Math). It has been directly involved in the planning and implementation of integrated development programmes both in Kolkata slums and in rural areas of the southern districts of West Bengal for more than fifty years. It has two major wings: (i) Field extension wing, and (ii) Training wing.

**Working Area:** RKMLP is implementing its programmes mainly in East and West Medinipur, South and North 24 Parganas, Murshidabad, Bardhaman, Nadia, Purulia, Bankura, and Kolkata districts. But the coverage areas of some of the departments of RKMLP extend well beyond the state. These departments include: (i) the Key Resource Institute for the Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC); (ii) the Jan Sikshan Sansthan (JSS) or mass-education centre, and (iii) the Training, Orientation, and Resource Centre (TORC).

**Major Activities:** Following are the important activities of RKMLP:

- Adult and non-formal education
- Integrated woman-and-child development
- Preventive health care and general health services
- Promotion of safe water supply and environmental sanitation activities
- Agriculture and animal resource development
- Joint forest management and social forestry
- Promotion of self-help group activities
- Promotion of the use of solar energy
- Training in vocational skills, entrepreneurship, and organizational management
- Promotion of youth organizations for social development

**Organogram of RKMLP, Narendrapur, for implementation of water and sanitation programmes**



### **Programme Implementation Mechanism**

All the development programmes of RKMLP are implemented through its associate village youth clubs and cluster organizations (federation of associate vil-

lage youth clubs of RKMLP) under the guidance and expert support of the Parishad. RKMLP has developed a strong network involving more than 400 village youth clubs and 21 cluster organizations for decentralized programme planning, implementation, and monitoring of all its development activities.

### **RKMLP'S Sanitation Initiatives**

#### ***First Community-led Sanitation Initiative (1981):***

RKMLP noticed that the provision of hand pumps (for supply of drinking water), timely immunization, regular curative health care services, and nutritional supplements had failed to reduce the infant mortality rate (IMR) in one of its service areas—the Arapanch group of villages in the Sonarpur block of South 24 Parganas district. Further studies revealed that lack of proper sanitation and unhygienic habits of the people were the main causes for this. To overcome these shortcomings, RKMLP formally initiated a sanitation promotion programme in 1981 as a part of ICDS in the Arapanch area. The programme was implemented with the partial support of UNICEF. UNICEF was extending technical support and 60 per cent of the cost of construction of household latrines (two-pit, up to plinth level). RKMLP mobilized beneficiary families to contribute the entire cost of the superstructure and 40 per cent of the cost of construction up to plinth level. 250 latrines were constructed within a year.

RKMLP was able to create a demand for construction of household latrines in the programme area through social mobilization and community contact drives. As a result, the Mothers' Committees of the Arapanch group of villages placed a demand for construction of another 350 household latrines in the second phase of work. UNICEF officials informed us that due to fund constraints, they would be able to extend support for the construction of only 250 more latrines at the previous rates. RKMLP called a meeting of the Mothers' Committees and communicated UNICEF's message. It was also suggested that if the beneficiary families shared 60 per cent of the cost of construction up to plinth

**Lessons from RKMLP's First Initiative:** During the implementation of the two aforementioned programmes, RKMLP gained major logistic insights into the strategies necessary for the successful promotion of sanitation:

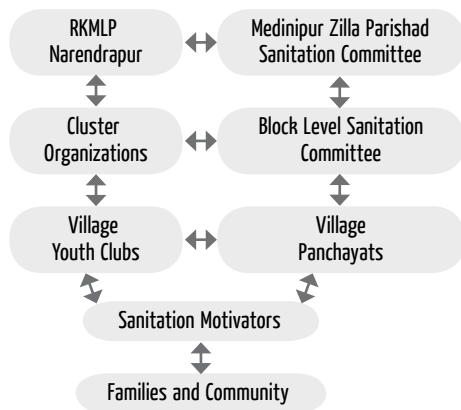
- Installation of sanitary facilities without external subsidies can be promoted if people are properly educated about the need for them.
- Sanitation programmes should aim at saturating well-integrated areas with the objective of covering all households.
- Involvement of women in the planning and implementation of sanitation programmes must be ensured, because it is they who feel the need for such facilities the most.
- Youth and village voluntary organizations must be involved in planning, implementation, and monitoring for these programmes to be sustainable.

level and bore the full cost of the superstructure, then with the aid available from UNICEF, toilets could be installed in all the 350 households. After several rounds of discussion, the Mothers' Committees agreed to RKMLP's proposal, and household latrines were constructed for all 350 families within one and a half years. Both these programmes benefited the economically weaker families in the community.

#### ***First Self-financed Sanitation Initiative (1986):***

Keeping the above lessons in mind, RKMLP planned a sanitation programme on a 'no-subsidy' principle. A blueprint for a programme of household latrine construction in ten villages of South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, and Medinipur districts was designed. It was unanimously decided in the project formulation meeting involving the village youth club functionaries that no financial support for construction of household toilets was to be offered to the families. Instead, needy families could avail themselves of short-term loans through the youth clubs. It was decided that people of the target villages would be educated about the need for safe sanitation and its relation to health. A project proposal was submitted to UNICEF, which sanctioned





### Implementation Infrastructure

financial aid of Rs 80,000 as a revolving fund and another 40,000 for human resource development, social mobilization activities, and intensive awareness programmes through audiovisual aids, showing how people get infected with diarrhoeal diseases due to the habit of open defecation and drinking unsafe water. Within a span of two years, 349 household latrines were installed as part of this project. The beneficiary families contributed 100 per cent of the cost of installation of their latrines. By this time, RKMLP had developed such expertise in the sanitation sector that UNICEF and CAPART (Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology) recognized RKMLP as one of the resource agencies for human resource development in sanitation activities for projects supported by them.

### Demand-driven Sanitation Movement in Medinipur

During the Water and Sanitation Decade (1981–90), West Bengal was one of the seven states selected for implementation of intensive sanitation programmes. UNICEF, one of the partners in the WatSan Decade programmes, requested RKMLP to prepare a proposal covering an entire district with innovative approaches to the promotion of sanitation.

The first innovative sanitation promotion programme based on a demand-driven strategy was conceived, designed, and initiated in Medinipur

district in 1990 by RKMLP and UNICEF jointly, and implemented in collaboration with the government of West Bengal and Medinipur Zilla Parishad.

### Implementation Infrastructure

A three-tier implementation infrastructure was created in Medinipur for effective implementation of sanitation promotion activities.

A district level sanitation committee was constituted under the chairmanship of the Zilla Parishad Sabhadhipati (chairperson of the district board). The other members of the committee were the district magistrate, representatives of RKMLP and UNICEF, the head of the standing committee on public health and environment of the Zilla Parishad, the additional executive officer of the Zilla Parishad, the district panchayat officer, and the district chief medical officer (of health). The committee was to provide guidance and policy support for the smooth implementation of the community-led and demand-driven sanitation promotion strategy conceived and designed by RKMLP.

Similar sanitation committees were constituted in all the project blocks and village panchayats of the district, involving block-level development officials and panchayat functionaries, heads of village panchayats, and members of cluster organizations and village youth clubs of RKMLP.

Sanitation subcommittees were also constituted in all the cluster organizations and village youth clubs of RKMLP, and these subcommittees were the key bodies in planning, implementing, and monitoring the demand-driven sanitation programmes in the villages.

In the initial years of the programme, RKMLP's cluster organizations and village youth clubs played the key role in spreading new concepts and chalking out the path of the sanitation movement in Medinipur villages. As part of the process of transmitting the message of demand-driven sanitation, a network of trained sanitation motivators, one for every 200–250 families, was developed. These trained sanitation motivators were attached to the village youth clubs and were responsible for regu-

## ***Salient Features of the Medinipur Sanitation Programme***

- This happened to be the first sanitation project in the country initiated in a movement mode.
- It was a 'demand-driven', 'community-led' sanitation promotion programme. The emphasis was on intensive, area-specific, and time-bound 'information, education, and communication' (IEC)/'social mobilization' activities. Specific action-oriented programmes were designed and conducted to generate awareness and create demand for sanitation.
- Intensive human resource development programmes were designed and conducted for the functionaries of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs), PRIs, and the administrative staff from district to village levels to inculcate positive attitudes and skills for implementation of demand-driven sanitation.
- Initially, this was a 'no subsidy' programme for construction of household toilets; the beneficiary families were contributing the entire cost. In 1994, the government of West Bengal introduced an end incentive of Rs 200 for below-poverty-line (BPL) families that came forward to have toilets installed in their homes.
- As there was no provision for subsidies, and as both motivation and means for investing in household toilets was rather low among the target population, RKMLP decided to develop a range of toilet models with varying costs, with provision for upgradation. Six different cost-effective household toilet models, with cost ranging from Rs 230 to 2,600 (in 1990), were offered for families to choose from according to their economic resources.

larly contacting the different households and communicating to them the need for sanitary facilities and their beneficial effect on health and quality of life. The cluster organizations and village youth clubs, along with their trained sanitation motivators, were the crucial elements in the success of this sanitation programme.

### ***Youth: The Key Force in the Movement***

It was emphasized by Swami Vivekananda that youth are the key agents of change. The veracity of



*Aiming for 100% coverage: household toilets in Medinipur (blue)*

- An alternate delivery network was developed by establishing 'production centres cum rural sanitary marts' (PC-RSMs) in each block involving cluster organizations of RKMLP. 25 such PC-RSMs were established in East Medinipur and 29 in West Medinipur district.
- A network of voluntary workers (sanitation motivators) was developed involving the associate village youth clubs and village panchayats. Incentives were provided to motivators in proportion to their achievements.
- This was the first instance in India of a voluntary organization being entrusted to act as a nodal agency for implementing a sanitation programme in an entire district with the district administration and PRIs extending the necessary support required for implementation of the programme.
- A systematic weekly monitoring mechanism involving all sectors was developed to monitor progress and overcome shortcomings.

Swamiji's statement was remarkably substantiated by the Medinipur sanitation movement, which was largely powered by youth force. In order to familiarize the youth and youth organizations with the concept and necessity of demand-driven and self-financed sanitation and its effects on human health and society, a series of orientation programmes were organized by RKMLP at the very beginning of the programme. Due to this initiative, a large number of village youth clubs participated spontaneously in the movement. At the beginning of the



*Empowering women: more than 300 women were trained in the manufacture of cement mosaic pans and other hardware*

programme in 1990, only 125 village youth clubs were involved in the programme. But within two years about a thousand more village youth clubs with about 25,000 volunteers joined hands with the movement.

### ***Developing a Range of Technical Options***

The primary focus of the Medinipur sanitation programme was on changing the popular mindset about sanitary practices so that open defecation would be totally discontinued in favour of home toilet use. While developing toilet models, the following issues were kept in mind: (i) existing sanitary habits and cultural practices of the people; (ii) attitude of families towards cash investment; and (iii) comfort of the household.

The Medinipur sanitation programme was the first sanitation promotion initiative in the country to develop and offer a range of technical options for toilet construction to the community. RKMLP conducted a study to assess the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of the people of Medinipur district regarding sanitation and hygiene. This was done to develop relevant strategies, programmes, and IEC material for awareness generation. The study revealed that virtually no family was willing to invest more than around Rs 200 to 600 for construction of household toilets. It was this information about the attitude of families towards investment in toilets that led RKMLP into developing different toilet models and demonstrating their use to the community. In the process of implementation it was observed that even high-income families were opting for the least costly toilet model in the beginning. After some years, when they developed the habit

of household toilet use, these families upgraded their toilet units through the network of trained masons of the sanitary marts operated by RKMLP's cluster organizations.

### ***Creating a Supply System***

One of the basic objectives of the Medinipur sanitation movement was to generate demand for sanitary facilities through intensive awareness-raising and social mobilization. Along with demand generation, it was equally important to develop a sustainable supply chain to respond to the increased demand, to provide necessary hardware and ancillary services. RKMLP therefore developed a supply chain network by establishing production centres cum rural sanitary marts (PC-RSMs) involving the cluster organizations in every block. The PC-RSM is an institutional network from where motivated families can procure all the materials required for installing toilets as well as other materials like bathing platforms and improved smokeless chulas, and also the skilled labour required for installing these facilities. PC-RSMs produce cement mosaic pans and traps, concrete platforms, and pit-covers, and supply these to customers on payment. 54 such PC-RSMs were established across Medinipur.

### ***Generating Demand***

Generating demand for self-financed household toilet construction and for other sanitary facilities was a very hard task in the 1990s because that was the time of high government subsidies. Almost all development programmes then being implemented by government departments and NGOs were highly subsidized. There was even provision for a subsi-





dy of Rs 2,000 for construction of household toilets benefiting BPL and scheduled caste/scheduled tribe (SC/ST) families under CRSP. Given this situation, implementing a self-financed sanitation programme was really a challenge for RKMLP. RKMLP met this challenge through a series of innovative strategies:

- *Focused Area-wise Approach:* Some villages were initially identified as demonstration areas for the programme. With this approach, 4 villages were able to achieve 100 per cent toilet coverage within 9 months. Inspired by this experience, 24 more villages achieved 100 per cent toilet access in the second year. As the focused area-wise approach continued, all villages in 3 panchayats were saturated with 100 per cent toilet access over the next two years.
- *Time-bound Programmes:* An intensive awareness drive continuing for 3–6 months was planned for each geographical area to maximize impact.
- *Involvement of Youth and Youth Organizations:* The entire programme was implemented through village youth clubs, and the youth were engaged as sanitation motivators—the prime agents of change. Youth clubs played a key role in motivating families and spreading the concept of 100 per cent toilet access—sanitary facilities in all households of the village.
- *Intensive Awareness Generation Activities:* Intensive activities for awareness generation were designed and implemented in the target villages. The major emphasis was on a home contact drive by trained sanitation motivators and by a group of youth club functionaries as also on focused group activities. In addition, a large number of mass communication programmes on sanitation—sanitation songs, video and slide shows, dramatic per-

*Generating awareness: murals, women's meetings, and folk presentations (clockwise from top left)*



formances, exhibitions, rallies, wall writings, and hoardings—were organized and displayed to create a favourable atmosphere for the sanitation movement.

- *Empowerment of Women:* Having to defecate in the open is a major problem for women living in thickly populated areas. Moreover, the responsibility of nursing diarrhoea-affected persons at home often devolves solely on women. Considering the concerns of women and the hardships they faced, their direct involvement in the movement ensured its success. 30 per cent of the sanitation motivators were women. Women visited families in groups to ensure successful motivation for installation and use of toilets. About 140 women were trained as masons and were engaged in production of sanitary wares.
- *Involvement of Panchayats:* Promotion of sanitation is one of the basic responsibilities of PRIs. Adequate emphasis was laid on the proper orientation and involvement of PRI members in promoting demand-driven sanitation from the very beginning of the programme. Panchayat members were also visiting families to motivate them to adopt appropriate sanitation practices. (To be concluded)



# Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith: Focus on Environment

**Dr V V Subramanian, Dr T S Suryanarayanan, Dr V Sivasubramanian,  
Dr S Swaminathan, Dr K Kannan**

**R**AMAKRISHNA Mission Vivekananda College, a unit of the Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Chennai, has been conducting research on environmental issues with considerable success, which has brought it recognition at both national and international levels. The success story of two research groups forming part of the Department of Plant Biology and Plant Biotechnology led to the formation of two independent research units: Vivekananda Institute of Tropical Mycology (VINSTROM) and Vivekananda Institute of Algal Technology (VIAT). In this article we highlight the achievements of these two units. We shall also briefly touch upon the role of the Viveka Nature Club, another important wing of this institution, in the study of wildlife and environment.

## **Vivekananda Institute of Tropical Mycology**

Research in mycology (fungal studies) was initiated at this institute twenty-six years ago in the Department of Botany, with the initiative coming from Dr T S Suryanarayanan and Dr V Muruganandam. Even at that time, research on fungi had reached such levels of excellence in many foreign laboratories that it was very difficult to attain international competitiveness in this field. But today VINSTROM has made an international mark in mycological studies related to the environment. The following

is a brief account of its achievements and its commitment to environment research.

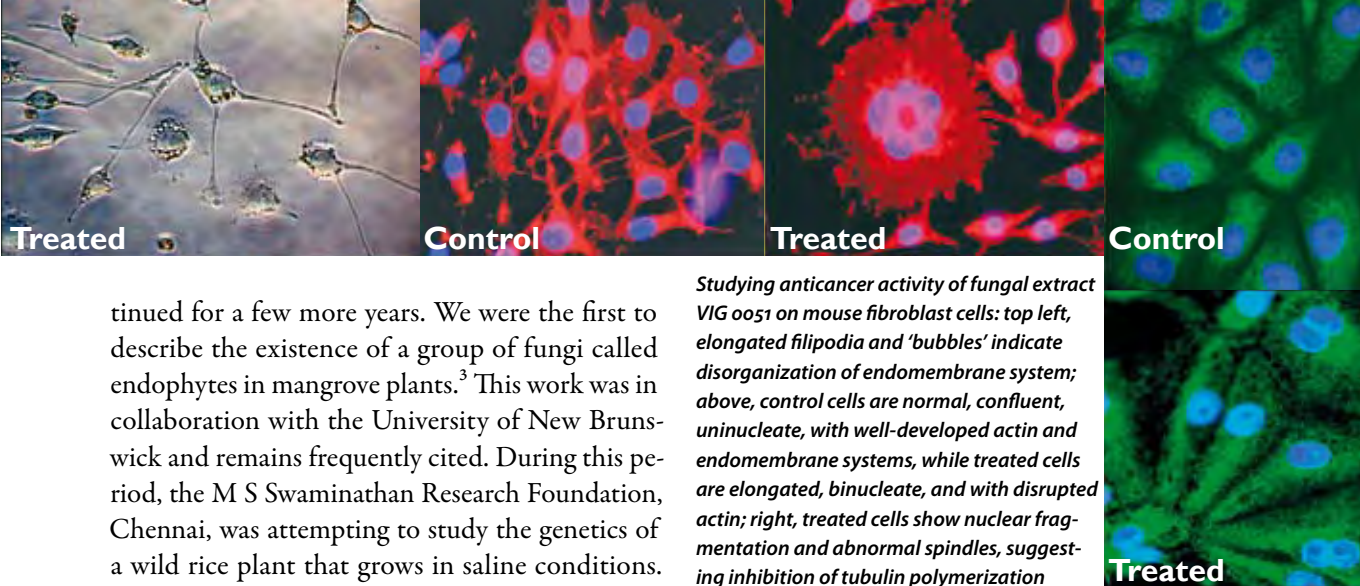
## **Fungi from Marine and High-salt Environments**

Marine biologists now have much data on the adaptive and survival methods of different groups of marine organisms, including bacteria. However, in the 1970s, knowledge on the survival strategies of marine fungi was still inchoate; the only exceptional work was from a group in Liverpool, England.<sup>1</sup> We began to study the adaptive strategies of a typical marine fungus, *Cirrenelia pygmea*. Our results, which were reported in European journals, brought to light the role of fatty acids and melanin pigment in sustaining fungal life in saline environments.<sup>2</sup> This work showcased our research abilities and resulted in Dr T S Suryanarayanan being invited to lecture on this subject at the International Marine Mycology Symposium held at Portsmouth in 1995. The work was also highlighted in *Annual Reviews*, and Dr J P Ravishankar, who did doctoral work on this problem in our laboratory, was invited for a two-year post-doctoral tenure at Ohio in a project funded by the National Institute of Health, USA.

Our investigations on the status of fungal communities in mangrove plants and hypersaline soils con-

*Inaugurating VINSTROM:  
Swami Satyapriyananda  
and Dr T S Suryanarayanan*





*Studying anticancer activity of fungal extract VIG 0051 on mouse fibroblast cells: top left, elongated filipodia and 'bubbles' indicate disorganization of endomembrane system; above, control cells are normal, confluent, uninucleate, with well-developed actin and endomembrane systems, while treated cells are elongated, binucleate, and with disrupted actin; right, treated cells show nuclear fragmentation and abnormal spindles, suggesting inhibition of tubulin polymerization*

tinued for a few more years. We were the first to describe the existence of a group of fungi called endophytes in mangrove plants.<sup>3</sup> This work was in collaboration with the University of New Brunswick and remains frequently cited. During this period, the M S Swaminathan Research Foundation, Chennai, was attempting to study the genetics of a wild rice plant that grows in saline conditions. Its aim was to locate salt-tolerant gene(s) in this plant and then transfer these to the common variety of rice with the hope of bestowing the common rice strain with the ability to grow in coastal areas. We contributed our mite to this effort by studying the endophytic fungi associated with this wild rice strain; this collaboration resulted in two publications, one of which is co-authored by Prof. M S Swaminathan himself.<sup>4</sup>

These efforts brought instant recognition from mycological societies across the globe and resulted in several collaborations with international institutions including the University of New Brunswick, University of Spain, University of Arizona (Smithsonian project), Stony Brook University, University of Münster, Helmholtz Center for Infection Research (Department of Biotechnology project), and the Indian Institute of Science. It also helped us acquire research projects with grants totalling nearly seven million rupees. Swami Satyapriyananda, then Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda College, saw the potential of the laboratory and raised it to the level of an institute named after Swami Vivekananda on 8 April 2005. Since then, VINSTROM has rededicated itself to the cause of ecology and environment with reference to fungi.

### **Reducing Insecticide- and Oil-Pollution**

Scientists from the University of Münster visited VINSTROM in November, 2004, and were interested in technical collaboration. VINSTROM has now

signed a memorandum of understanding with the University of Münster to study chitosanases produced by fungi. Chitosanases are enzymes that act on chitin polymers (a group of natural polymers) to produce molecules of shorter lengths called chitosans, through various degrees of deacetylation. It has recently been found that chitosans are safe and eco-friendly alternatives to chemical insecticides. They also enhance wound-healing and are an effective food supplement for mitigating arthritis. Our preliminary studies in this area have been very promising. VINSTROM has applied to the National Biodiversity Board of India for transfer of material to Germany to carry out sophisticated molecular-level and gene-disruption studies.

During its early days, our department studied the possible role of fungi in abating petroleum pollution in the soil around refineries. We showed that several fungi are capable of surviving in the heavily polluted soil around refineries and are able to degrade long-chain petroleum hydrocarbons. We demonstrated that soils devoid of these fungi had more crude oil pollutants, and that these persisted for a longer time than those that had these fungi. This was an important finding because the hydrocarbon-degrading ability of filamentous fungi was not well understood at that time. Based on this work, we were able to offer suggestions to Madras Refineries for undertaking farming methods to reduce petroleum hydrocarbon pollution.

### **Bioprospecting and Forest Fungal Inventory**

Forests are invaluable as a bio-resource for developing countries because of the great diversity of life forms they support. Even among forests, those located in the tropics have a particularly high diversity of life forms. One of the aims of bio-prospecting in tropical forests is to obtain microorganisms from these forests and to screen them as possible sources for novel biochemicals such as antibiotics and anti-cancer drugs. Although it is well known that tropical fungi are a potentially rich source of such chemicals, there has hardly been any study in this area in India. VINSTROM now has a collaborative project with Helmholtz Center for Infection Research, Braunschweig, to isolate fungi from the Mudumalai forest in South India, and to screen them for anticancer substances. The Department of Biotechnology, Government of India, is funding this project. We have already succeeded in isolating a few novel biochemicals from fungi that appear to arrest the growth of cancer cells in culture.

An inventory of the fungi found in our forests is a *sine qua non* for further efforts to use these fungi to benefit society. Realizing the need for this, the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, and the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education sanctioned two VINSTROM projects to screen the forests of South India for different groups of fungi. These studies resulted in

several publications in high impact factor journals that have put our institution on the world map.<sup>5</sup> As a result, researchers from Sri Lanka and the US have expressed their keenness to visit VINSTROM to learn the techniques we use for studying fungi.

In addition, VINSTROM is currently involved in collaborative research with Arizona University, Tucson, which involves multi-level analyses of several forests in South India, Cameroon, and Panama—an effort funded by the prestigious Smithsonian Foundation. VINSTROM has now built up a collection of rare fungi having unique properties. This is a great genetic resource; we intend upgrading VINSTROM into a resource centre for unique culture collections.

### **Vivekananda Institute of Algal Technology**

The unit on Algal Physiology and Biotechnology at Vivekananda College started working on eco-physiological aspects of marine diatoms and other freshwater microalgae in 1988, with Dr V Sivasubramanian as head. Its first international publication was on absorption and removal of heavy metals from solutions using a bio-reactor column packed with immobilized cells of *Aphanocapsa pulchra*, a cyanobacterium isolated from cooling towers. Since then, eighteen researchers have obtained MPhil degrees and five others their PhD by undertaking research with this unit. The unit has also organized three national-level workshops and four national-level

symposia on various aspects of applied algology, and has more than thirty publications in national and international journals. The algology unit started working on effluent treatment using microalgae from 2002 with the first effluent samples being obtained from Chemfab Alkalis, Pondicherry. The

*Bioprospecting in Mudumalai Forest: Dr Suryanarayanan and research students*







*Undergraduate students in the VIAT laboratory*

encouraging results obtained with the Chemfab effluent gave us great confidence in our techniques, and we began signing memoranda of understanding with a number of industries to treat effluents using microalgae. In recognition of the work being carried out by this unit, the Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith decided to upgrade it to the Vivekananda Institute of Algal Technology (VIAT) on 17 April 2006 with Swami Satyapriyananda as Chairman, Dr V Sivasubramanian as Director, Dr V V Subramanian as Joint-Director, and six experts in the field forming the advisory committee.

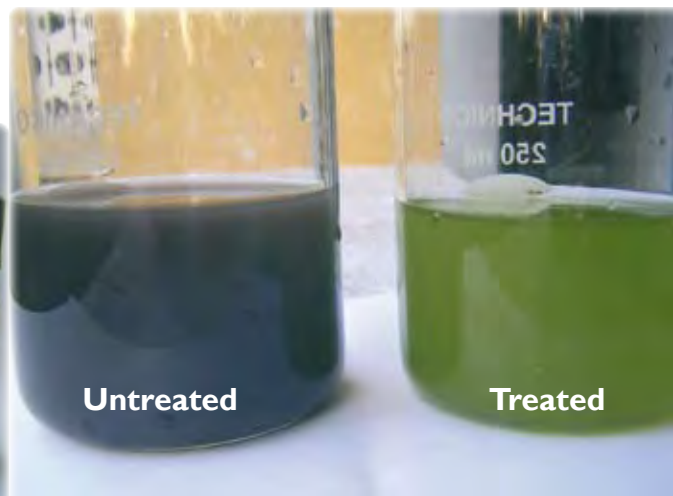
### ***Why Microalgae?***

Microalgae have vast industrial and economic potential as a valuable source of pharmaceuticals, health foods, carotenoids, dyes, biofuel, and the

like. The history of the commercial use of algal cultures with various applications goes back about fifty years. Furthermore, it has been suggested that algae may be able to solve emerging environmental problems, such as the greenhouse effect and industrial pollution. Algae can fix carbon dioxide by photosynthesis (which is of help in countering global warming) and produce nutrients efficiently at minimal cost. In addition, photosynthetically produced oxygen can meet the high biological oxygen demand (BOD) of waste water. Microalgae also have the ability to fix nitrogen in various ways as well as absorb heavy metals and phosphorus. They can utilize various organic compounds as their carbon source. All these factors have attracted many researchers to the study of microalgae as providing possible solutions to environmental problems.

In a recent article, Venkataraman observed that 'the production technologies of microalgae and biochemicals of high value [derived] from them have not been substantial. The reasons are many and reflect the ethos of industry and [the] inability to adopt unconventional technologies. Control of algal growth in unwanted regions viz., ponds, lakes, industrial pipelines, [and] swimming pools, which has a huge market, has never been addressed. India has failed to introduce anything special and sale-

*Below, pigments extracted from microalgae, useful as food colourants, in cosmetics, and in medical diagnostics; right, effluent before and after treatment with microalgae*







*Mass algal cultivation at Vivekananda College, top left; slope tank, centre, and effluent treatment plant, top right, at SNAP Alginates, Ranipet*

able in this area of algal technology as in the West. This is a paradox considering that most parts of India with plentiful sunshine are really well-suited for algal production almost [all the] year around.<sup>16</sup>

Waste-water-grown microalgal products with commercial value are few in number. The most widespread use of algae in India is for photosynthetic oxygenation. Sludge containing microalgae is also used for biogas production and as fertilizer. There are, however, many microalgal products that have been developed in the laboratory, and a few of these have been put to commercial use. These could also be produced from waste water, with considerable economic benefit. Hygienic constraints and the presence of contaminants are obvious problems that need to be surmounted. In many coun-

tries, there may also be some concern regarding the use of human excreta to produce consumables. Microalgae can be used for generating hydrogen gas, as feed for aquaculture, as advanced fertilizers, and as biochemical nutrients. Only about one per thousand of the world's algal species have been sufficiently explored with regard to their biochemical content; in India the fraction is still lower. It is high time that scientists and industry personnel in India worked together to find eco-friendly and cost-effective solutions, using microalgal technology, for the problems caused by effluents.

*(Conclusion and references, next issue)*

## VIAT-Industry Partnerships

**Chemfab Alkalies, Pondicherry:** This factory uses groundwater at various stages during the process of extracting useful chemicals from crude sea salt. The effluent generated has a very high salinity and TDS (total dissolved solids) content. VIAT experimented with various species of freshwater as well as marine microalgae and was able to provide a viable method of lowering the TDS using immobilized microalgal cells.

**SNAP Alginates, Ranipet:** The acidic effluent from this factory is being treated in a number of shallow tanks with induced turbulence (High-rate Algal Ponds) using microalgal technology to increase pH and reduce salt levels. Treatment using sloped tanks was tried and found to enhance both evaporation and bioremediation.

**Orchid Pharmaceuticals and Chemicals, Alathur:** While working on phycoremediation at this pharmaceutical company, VIAT made another important breakthrough: control of biofouling in cooling towers using herbal extracts. Biofouling refers to the undesirable accumulation

of microbes, algae, plants, and animals on perpetually moist surfaces. The chemicals used to prevent biofouling—tributyltin and triphenyltin, for instance—are known to have toxic properties. VIAT has carried out successful field trials of herbal alternatives to these chemicals and has commenced a regular supply of these herbal products. We are in the process of patenting this herbal technique for control of biofouling.

**Ultramarine and Pigments, Ranipet:** Ultramarine and Pigments is a leading manufacturer of detergents and pigment blue. This industry generates three types of effluents: (i) Acidic effluent (pH 2.8) from its sulphonation plant; (ii) Scrubber effluent, with pH 6; and (iii) blue effluent, pH 6 with high TDS content. The effluents contain sodium sulphates and sulphites. Here the aim of phycoremediation is to reduce TDS and remove residual sulphates and sulphites. VIAT has identified microalgal species capable of growing in the effluent and meeting the above aims. Field trials are in progress.

# Ulūka—The Owl in Sanskrit Literature

Dr Suruchi Pande

**S**ANSKRIT is an important language because it has had a long and rich tradition of literature and occupies a unique position as an indisputable and reliable means of understanding the life, mind, and culture of ancient Indians. The traditions of linguistics and philosophy cultivated through Sanskrit for nearly four millennia continue to influence and inspire people all over the world. Sanskrit has long been the medium for nurturing the Indian mind and Indian culture both in its orthodox and heterodox as well as spiritual and material aspects. It has also absorbed quite a few elements from non-Sanskrit languages and even influenced their development significantly. Thus, Sanskrit is a symbol of Indian unity.

Sanskrit continues to play an important role in the life, thought, and cultural expression of the Indian people. It is a window into our ancient heritage. It helps us understand how our ancestors viewed nature in general and—in the context of this article—bird life in particular. It is very important that we understand our tradition of compassion. Vedic philosophers had deep insights into the close relationship between human beings and nature. Sanskrit literature is also witness to India's rich biodiversity.

Birds form the most beautiful, widely admired, and entertaining group in the animal kingdom. The variety among birds is indeed very wide. They are found in extremely hot and cold regions as well as in more temperate climes. Mountains and oceans do not create obstacles for them. Some birds tend to remain in one place, while others are migratory.

Several perspectives could be brought to bear upon Indian ethno-ornithological studies: those with reference to lexicons, mythology, medicine,

superstition and augury, religion, culture, architecture, mysticism, bird habits, migratory routes, and so on. This article takes a literary approach. Literary works are replete with references to birds, and descriptions of their habits, habitat, and relation with human beings. Our focus here is on the owl.

Birds evidently made a deep impact on the lives of people in ancient India. Our ancestors observed birds and their life cycle with respect. The soul was often compared to a bird. Many mythical tales were based on birds. Ancient Indian literature also has mythical and imaginary references to birds which cannot be identified. The *bheruṇḍa* (a bird with two heads) and *jṛmbha* are cases in point.

Right from Vedic times we come across numerous references to birds—descriptions of their appearance and habits. Birds were a part of the daily life of Vedic people as well as their sacrificial rituals. The Upanishads mention birds, mainly figuratively, to describe such philosophical concepts as non-attachment. In the Mahabharata, we have an interesting reference to vultures:

*Śakunīnāmivākāśe jale vāricarasya vā;*

*Yathā gatirna-dṛśyeta tathaiva sumahātmanah.*

'As the tracks of vultures in the sky and of fish in water are not seen, so is the case with the wise.'<sup>1</sup>

## The Owl Mystique

In India, birds like owls, crows, and vultures are considered unwelcome. The roots of such attitudes can be found in Indian mythology. Therein the very appearance of the owl is often related to death and ill luck. So people came to believe that an owl alighting on the housetop augured of misfortune or calamity. The nocturnal habits and shrill, screeching cry of the owl also probably contributes to this



PETER NIBLETT

mystique. There may also be social reasons behind these notions.

Such beliefs can be traced right back to the Rig Veda. Therein the pigeon and the owl are referred to as birds bringing misfortune. In the Bhagavata, the owl's cry—'screeching without stop, as if to announce the doom of the world'—is mentioned as one of the omens that announced Krishna's demise.<sup>2</sup> The *Garuda Purana* states that one who cheats a woman is born as an owl in the next birth. The Mahabharata mentions rebirth as an owl as a result of stealing flour cakes.<sup>3</sup> The *Yajnavalkya Smriti* prescribes that students should take a break from their studies if they hear an owl cry.

Beliefs and attitudes, however, change with time. In the Puranic period some birds came to be considered auspicious as they were believed to act as vehicles for certain gods. Thus *garuda* (eagle) came to be associated with Vishnu, *hamsa* (swan) with Brahma, and *uluka* (owl) with Lakshmi. Owls (especially *Tyto alba*, or the barn owl) feed on various small animals—particularly squirrels and mice, which cause damage to crops—and are thus beneficial to agriculture. It was perhaps for this reason that the owl got associated with Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. In Bengal, the owl (especially the white owl) is regularly worshipped with Goddess Lakshmi, and is depicted as her vehicle in religious iconography. Lakshmi is also considered as one of the eight forms of Chamunda, and in one of the sculptures at Ellora the owl is seen as the vehicle of Chamunda.

The *Vasantaraja-shakuna* has discussed various predictions and augury associated with the owl (*pingala*). It takes note of both good and bad omens. For instance, if an owl flies away from the branch of a tree in search of food, and if it again comes back and rests on the same branch, it suggests that a planned journey or pilgrimage will be successful.

It would be interesting to review some of the common notions associated with the owl among people of different cultures. In Lithuania, traditionally, the owl is not killed for fear of offending

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OWL

is my favourite. Who flies  
like a nothing through the night,  
who-whoing. Is a feather  
duster in leafy corners ring-a-rosy-ing  
boles of mice. ...

—George Macbeth

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evil spirits with whom it is associated. In Africa, Bantus do not touch the owl, because it is associated with sorcerers. People of Botswana have had the belief that an owl sitting on the rooftop portends calamity and a witch doctor is to be summoned to offset the evil. The witch doctor purifies the place with his magical spells, chants, and charms. Many American tribes associated the owl with the dead. In Europe too the owl is viewed as an evil omen and has been linked to the female sex.

The owl is clearly linked with magicians, sorcerers, and shamans across cultures. It has been widely believed that the owl possesses mystical powers which can affect human beings. And, as is often the case, evil can be turned into good through suitable rituals. Hence in many cultures there has been the custom of using owl feathers as talismans. Tribal people used to wear an owl head or an owl beak at feasts. Priests carried stuffed owls as symbols of their profession. An owl flying into a dovecote was thought to bring good luck. Its cry was thought to free one from fever, and if it was seen near the house of a pregnant woman, it augured an easy delivery. In Greece, the owl was supposed to be the symbol of science and arts. So the overall popular attitude towards the owl has been rather ambivalent.

### **The Owl in the Vedas and Later Myths**

The term *uluka* appears in the Rig Veda: 'May the cruel female fiend who wanders about at night like an owl, hiding herself, fall headlong into unbounded caverns. May the stones that grind the soma plant destroy the demons by their noise.'<sup>4</sup> This verse also occurs in the Atharva Veda (8.4.17) with some minor variations.

### Many names of the Owl

The descriptive synonyms for owl occurring in the Sanskrit lexicon *Amarakosha* (2.5.15) make interesting reading:

1. *Ulūka*, having a shrill cry. (*Ullū* is the common term for owl in Hindi and its dialects.)
2. *Vāyasārāti*, enemy of crows.
3. *Pecaka*, a general term for owls, of uncertain derivation. (*Pecā* is the Bengali term for owl.)
4. *Divāndha*, blind during the day.
5. *Kauśika*, residing in *kuśa* (grass) nests or in holes (*kośa*).
6. *Ghūka*, making a deep guttural *ghū-ghū* sound—an onomatopoeic word. (In Marathi, the owl is called *ghubad*.)
7. *Divābhīta*, afraid of daylight.
8. *Niśātana*, wandering at night.

The *Vajasaneyi Samhita* prescribes owls as offerings to forest trees during the Ashvamedha yajna (horse sacrifice).<sup>5</sup> This was perhaps because they roosted in forests.

The term *ulūkayātu* occurring in the Rig Veda and the Atharva Veda refers to a demon which was either shaped like an owl, or which moved like an owl, or which was in the habit of attacking at night.

Manfred Mayrhofer explains the word *ulūka* as follows: *ulūli* means crying aloud or being noisy (*ululare heulen*). This word is onomatopoeic and *ulūka* is an owl. The related term *ululi* refers to an outcry indicative of prosperity. This reminds one of the owl's associations with the goddess of wealth.

There are several interesting mythical tales involving owls. According to the *Valmiki Ramayana*, Kraunchi (the curlew personified as the daughter of the primeval progenitor, Kashyapa Prajapati) is the mother of owls. In the Mahabharata, which is an early source of animal tales, there is a dialogue between a vulture and a fox where the vulture describes the cemetery as a place rent by the calls of owls. There is also the story of the owl named Pravarakarna who lived in the Himalayas. When King Indradyumna fell from heaven after having enjoyed

the results of his good deeds, even the ancient sage Markandeya failed to recognize him. The sage then took him successively to Pravarakarna and Nadijangha, the stork—both of whom were older than Markandeya—and they too could not recognize the king. Finally it was the ancient tortoise Akupara that recognized the king and remembered his noble deeds—the lake in which Akupara lived had been made by the footprints of the innumerable cows that the king had donated. In this story, the term *prāvārakarna*, meaning 'cloak-eared', is important. This would identify the species as the horned owl. A similar reference is found in the 'Kakolukiyam' section of the *Panchatantra*.

The *Adbhuta Ramayana* has another interesting story: There was a king named Bhuvanasha. He passed an order that only Vedic mantras were to be used in praise of deities, while the king himself was to be honoured by singing. There was a Brahmana named Harimitra who was a great devotee of Vishnu. He offered his prayers to his favourite deity by singing in his sweet and melodious voice. The king was annoyed when he came to know this and started harassing Harimitra. Due to this injustice, he was born as an owl and was forced to eat his own dead body when he felt hungry. This owl happened to come to the caves near Manasa where he met Harimitra. The large-hearted Harimitra was, however, very sympathetic to the owl. The owl, who came to be known as Ganabandhu, became a great master of music and taught music to the sage Narada. It is worth noting here that the calls of the forest owl are actually very melodious.

In the 'Uttarakanda' of the *Valmiki Ramayana* there is a story of a vulture and an owl fighting over a nest [though scholars consider it an interpolation]. The birds go to Rama for justice. Rama's judgement is insightful: The owl was residing in the nest from the time of origin of trees and creepers. The vulture took up residence there from the time human beings appeared. This implied that the owl was present before the scavenging vulture, for trees came into being before human beings. So the owl was declared the rightful owner of the nest.



### Other Literary References

The *Kumarasambhava* of Kalidasa speaks of the largesse of the Himalayas—it shelters the high and the low without distinction. Even darkness gets to hide in its caves during the day, much like the owl: ‘*Divākarād-rakṣati yo guhāsu linam divābhītam-ivāndhakāram*’.<sup>6</sup>

In the Tibetan Buddhist text *The Dharma among the Birds—A Precious Garland*, the owl is found in a mystical context: it is one among the birds that meditated on Buddha’s discourses. Its pronouncement is philosophical:

The hour of death without insight from meditation—what misery!  
A priest without morals—what misery!  
An old lama without judgement—what misery!  
A chieftain without judgement—what misery! ...  
Knowing the misery that all these things can bring—avoid them!

The *Mriga-pakshi-shastra* of the Jain monk Ham-sadeva provides a classification of numerous species of birds and animals, including the owl.

There are also texts with biological references. The *Vasantaraja-shakunam* has a chapter on *pingalaruta*, ‘the cry of the owlet’. It is interesting

to note that the author, Bhatta Vasantaraja, has particularly written about the owlet. The reason is simple: this is the variety most frequently seen. The text mentions five different calls of owlets. According to the reputed ornithologist Salim Ali, a large variety of harsh chattering, squabbling, and chuckling notes are observed among owlets.

In conclusion, it should be noted that though there are specific words for different varieties of owl in Sanskrit literature, these terms have at times been used in a vague manner as general synonyms for ‘owl’. In the vast corpus of Sanskrit literature, we find important observations strewn amidst nebulous statements. We even find mention of many birds that are not easily seen. This gives us an idea of the keen powers of observation of ancient Indians as well as the rich biodiversity of ancient India. A deeper study of these issues is bound to be fruitful. ❧

### References

1. Mahabharata, 12.231.24.
2. Bhagavata, 1.14.14.
3. Mahabharata, 13.112.98.
4. Rig Veda, 7.104.17.
5. Yajur Veda, 24.23.
6. *Kumarasambhava*, 1.12.

### On Nature and Human Arrogance

‘Hey, look at this beauty!’ he said and began to chase the rabbit. It ran from the bush where it was hiding. ‘Hey, stop! Take this fellow too with you!’ Swamiji said. ‘Oh, you don’t want to have anything to do with humans?’ he ran a few steps saying thus and returned to where I was standing. ‘Son, look at anything,’ he told me, ‘look at anything, the crow, or peacock, or parrot, or falcon ... everything is beautiful. It is the greatness of His craftsmanship.’

We went ahead a few more steps. There was a very peculiar bluish flower, with a tint of red, swaying gently in the wind. ‘Look at this lady! How beautiful she is! She doesn’t run away. She is quiet and composed. She is calling us, swaying her head, to look at her beauty and appreciate’...

‘What a wonder this is!’ Swamiji addressed the flower. ‘You are such a beautiful lady, but you are sitting alone here! Who will look at your beauty in this forest? Your

beauty is wasted here. If you were near some village, at least some people would have enjoyed your beauty, appreciated it, and spoken about it to others: “Come to our village, there is a beautiful lady flower, see and appreciate it.” You may be beautiful, but you don’t have any wisdom! You have come here to dwell in a forest!’ He walked a few steps, stood, and looked as if he was listening to the words of the flower. ‘What did you say?’ He spoke in a depressed voice, ‘True, sister, what you say is true.’ He then turned to me and asked, ‘Did you hear what she said? “If I were to be near a village, would the people there let me live? They would pick me up and kill me.” Her words were true. It is only man who is arrogant. He wants everything beautiful for himself. He destroys everything for his pleasure. He has learnt how to destroy and he is also on the path of destruction.’

—Memoirs of Sri Mukunduru Swamiji



**Barn or Screech Owl**  
(*Tyto alba*)—*Ulūka*

*Field characteristics:* The typical and commonly-seen owl. Spotted golden brown upper body, silky white lower portion tinged with buff.

*Habits:* Lives easily in the company of human beings. Mainly nests in deserted buildings, ancient forts, and ruins. Spends the daytime standing upright and emerges after dusk with a screeching sound.

*Call:* A mixture of screeching and snoring with hissing notes.

*Food:* Mainly eats rats and mice, and is thus of great use to farmers.



**Forest Eagle-Owl (*Bubo nipalensis*)—*Śyenolūka***

*Field characteristics:* A large brown owl, has black-and-white 'horns' or ear tufts, fully-feathered legs, and brown eyes. This owl is the largest Indian owl. It is a ferocious hunter. Its hunting style and appearance is like that of a hawk.

*Habits:* Found in dense evergreen and moist deciduous forests.

*Call:* A very deep and far-reaching moaning hoot.

*Food:* Birds up to the size of a peafowl and mammals up to the size of a jackal.

**Indian Great Horned Owl**  
(*Bubo bubo*)—*Ghūka*

*Field characteristics:* Brown, with fully-feathered legs. Seen singly or in pairs in wooded rocky ravines or shady groves.

*Habits:* Mainly nocturnal. Avoids heavy forest and spends the day in the shelter of bushes and rocky ledges, or in old mango trees.

*Call:* A loud, deep, and resounding *ghū ghū* or *bubo*.

*Food:* Eats small mammals, birds, reptiles, fish, crabs, and large insects.



**Ornithological  
Features  
of Owl Species**

**Spotted Owlet**  
(*Athene brama*)—*Pi gala*

*Field characteristics:* White spotted greyish-brown little owl. It has a typical large round head. Its eyes are front-facing, big, and yellow.

*Habits:* Mainly nocturnal; spends the daytime in the hollows of ancient tree trunks or on secluded branches.

*Call:* A large variety of harsh chattering and chuckling notes.

*Food:* Chiefly insects, young birds, mice, and lizards.





## A Quiet and Peaceful Life

Janice Thorup

AYDELETTE KELSEY

**I**N volume five of *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vivekananda is recorded as having said: 'The first thing necessary is a quiet and peaceable life.'<sup>1</sup> The first thing! Swami Ashokananda says that until our minds are still, we cannot truly know even that God exists.<sup>2</sup> And the Gita has this to say about peace:

There is no true Knowledge possible for those who have not entered into this Peace, for without the Peace there can be no calm, and without calm how can there be knowledge or Wisdom? Outside of the Peace there is naught but the storm of the sense-desires, which sweepeth away the faculties of knowledge, as the fierce gale sweepeth away the mighty ship which is borne on the bosom of the ocean.<sup>3</sup>

Though we long for the commodities of quiet and peace—we seek a 'calmness and peace amidst the feverish unrest of the world' (18.53/77)—they are in short supply in today's world, and it is a difficult endeavour to live a quiet and peaceful life amidst

the frenzy of the world around us.

For part of a summer, all of a fall and winter, and into the following spring, I lived a quiet and peaceful life. For seven months, my husband and I served as caretakers on a piece of land in a remote valley in Tennessee. The land extends fifty-five acres over three open meadows bordered by valleys with waterfalls, a creek, and a hillside. It lies at the end of sixteen miles of a little-used dirt road. We were a two-mile walk from the mailbox, a mile from our nearest neighbour. We had no cellphone or TV reception. Our water came from a spring up the hill and we heated with wood. Our only companions, aside from each other, were two dogs. I spent most of my days outdoors and in silence, tending to vegetable gardens and a greenhouse or wandering around the fields and up the branches to the waterfalls, being, as the poet Mary Oliver says, 'idle and blessed'.<sup>4</sup>

This time was like stepping off the merry-go-round of our culture and standing in the still cen-

tre as the horses make their circular journey up and down and round and round to the accompaniment of tinny music. What the view from this place of stillness gave me was a chance to observe our culture—both what it grants us and what it expects of us.

In today's world, we are given instant access to information, a network that connects us to people all over the world, the ability to see our planet from space, and the opportunity to solve global problems of hunger, pollution, and poverty. But there are elements of modern culture that are toxic to us spiritually: in the US, we live in a culture that fosters fear, a culture in which consumerism is promoted and extolled, a culture in which we are expected to be continually available and always busy, and a culture that has lost the capacity for silence.

### **Fear**

During our time in Tennessee, I chose to forego news of the world. We did not get newspapers and I didn't listen to the radio. On the few occasions when I did read a newspaper, the world portrayed there bore little resemblance to the world I experienced in my everyday encounters with nature. I felt assaulted by the stories I read. The world expressed in the news seemed full of danger and violence; the stories seemed to have the singular goal of making me afraid.

The news-free world, lived among animals and growing things, with ample solitude and silence, was a tender and benevolent place. Not that we didn't experience nature wild and ruthless—we felt the edge of Hurricane Katrina; the creek flooded in January when it rained hard, over fifteen days; we had snowstorms when the dirt road iced up and became impassable. We watched the dogs catch and eat voles and the deer rutting trees, irrevocably damaging tender bark.

But there was, somehow, a rightness to it all, a flow to the days and weeks and months and seasons, and a feeling that things were as they should be. There was, as Gerard Manly Hopkins notes in his poem 'God's Grandeur,' 'the dearest freshness

deep down things'. But this freshness is obscured in our modern culture. Our direct experience of the world is often filtered through the media and technology. News analysts and experts are presented to do our thinking for us. Television, video games, and the news media can define our view of the world—our conception of reality—if we let them. Without some serious intellectual distance and discipline, we can live with a very distorted view of the world.

George Gerbner, who was professor and dean at the Annenberg School for Communication, identified what he called 'mean world syndrome'. Children who spend as much as three hours a day watching television and playing video games live in a world that is meaner than the world of actual experience. And while the effect on adults may be less, it is still significant. Television portrays violence as normal—as a common, even a good way of solving problems. Watching television or video-game violence desensitizes the viewer to victimization and suffering. Our ability to empathize, to resist violence, even to fully understand the consequences of violence, becomes compromised. Mean world syndrome holds us hostage to fear, and 'Fear is death,' warns Vivekananda, 'fear is the greatest sin.'<sup>5</sup> No doubt the world *is* dangerous. But there is an unhealthy emphasis on the negative in our culture and a desire to excite with fear. In such a culture, we lose the stories of kindness, of goodness—the kinds of stories that inspire us to be better people.

MacArthur Award-winning writer Vivian Paley is a kindergarten teacher. In her latest book, *The Kindness of Children*, she explains her belief that we must explicitly celebrate acts of kindness when we find them in order to teach children that these acts are valued—to counter our cultural predisposition toward negativity.<sup>6</sup> On a lecture tour to promote her book, she found that relating stories of kindness among children inspired her audience to tell their own stories of kindnesses. Now this is a wonderful thing. And it illustrates the impact of stories on our psyches: they colour our world for us. The destruc-



tive impact of stories of depravity and unkindness—the kind of stories that make up so much of our news today—is significant. What we choose to keep in our minds has an effect on our thinking and our sense of well-being.

My point is simply that we must realize we are making choices about what goes into our minds. We must understand the danger in giving over to someone else's control our view of the world around us. We can choose to filter out the most damaging of these influences—we need not watch TV just because it's there; we need not see violent movies just because they're blockbusters; we need not allow our children to play violent video games just because their friends do. We can maintain a detachment from popular culture that keeps us aware of the influence that negativity, violence, and fear have on us. We can follow St Paul's advice: 'Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.'<sup>7</sup>

### **Consumerism**

Re-entering a city after seven months in Tennessee, I was astonished by the clamour of advertising. Storefronts and billboards, even the sides of buses, assault us with messages to consume. A billboard with a photograph of a fish fillet sandwich at McDonald's excites a surge of desire (even though I don't really like this sort of food). Marketing is highly sophisticated. Even when we are aware of the media's role in creating desires within us, we are not immune to it. Acquisition has become a cultural norm. Our economy is based on our consumption of goods. Indeed, economic health in the US is measured by the gross domestic product, which assumes that each generation will be more materially wealthy than the generation it follows. Shopping has become both addiction and therapy.

We in the US use a disproportionate amount of the world's resources—if the rest of the world were brought up to our standard of living, it would require not one, but several more planets. We in the US must learn to live with less—we must reduce our rabid consumption of resources. We must become responsible consumers, choosing the durable over the disposable, knowing the difference between our real needs and our advertising-driven desires. We must seek to reduce our needs, our stuff—our baggage. In the Bible passage about the difficulty of a camel going through a needle's eye, Jesus warns that riches block the path to the kingdom of heaven. What we own,





tends to own us. The more our stuff occupies our minds, the less our minds are available and open to God.

### **Busy-ness**

The third toxin I want to highlight is the busy-ness and complexity of modern life. The pace of life is staggering. We celebrate multitasking and 24/7 availability. The technology that promised to give us more free time has in fact made us slaves to our time-saving gadgets. Busy-ness, rushing, the need to be constantly available, has become a cultural norm. We create the habit of rushing from one thing to the next. The toxicity of busy-ness is that it threatens our inner stillness, our ability to quiet and centre ourselves.

Perhaps the greatest gift Tennessee had to offer me was the gift of time, ample time in which to process everything that happened to me. And times in which nothing at all happened and my mind slipped into a sort of prayerful gratitude aimed at no one and encompassing all. I came to stillness through spending time with trees and plants and stones—incarnations of the Divine that are rooted in stillness, in simple being. But even in our busy, city lives, it is possible to create lives of simplicity and stillness. Gloria Essex is an example of one who has done so.<sup>8</sup> Gloria commutes to work each day on the MetroLink—a commuter train. She is famous on this train because she boards each morning and shouts, ‘Hello everybody!’ When she exits, she leaves the other passengers with this greeting: ‘Now, you all have a nice day.’ The effect of these greetings on the other passengers is startling. They smile, they giggle. ‘When she’s not on the train,’ says one passenger, ‘it’s kind of a let-down.’ Gloria comes to this joy and good humour through setting priorities in her life. She does not have it easy: she works a twelve-hour shift at a large city hospital: eight hours as an emergency room technician followed by a four-hour shift in the hospital’s housekeeping division. Gloria allows herself only one other activity: visits to the art museum. She seems to have created a leisurely life with time for joy and a focus on others by setting priorities for what she does when she’s not working.

It *is* possible to sculpt out time in our lives for what we deem important. In the sixth century, St Benedict created a monastic tradition with a rule that offers directives for daily living. The rule prescribes times for common prayer, meditative reading, and manual work—regular times for activity and rest, for work and prayer—ensuring that nothing impor-



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tant becomes lost to us in the distractions of our lives. Such a rule can be used to order our own lives. What's necessary for this to work is a hard look at our priorities.

### Noise

Closely related to busy-ness is the toxin of noise. The chief characteristic of our remote Tennessee valley was its stillness. I was never unaware of the silence there—particularly the lack of machinery noise, sirens, and garbage trucks. When we arrived in the summer, the chorus of insect songs was the primary sound. Later, when the weather cooled, even the sounds of nature—bugs and bees, birds and frogs—quieted. And there came a time when the only sound was the susurrant of the trees. My husband and I both noticed that we had a decreased inclination to speak. Our conversations became fewer but deeper. We devoted less time to talking about what to eat for dinner, and more time talking about things spiritual.

Silence is helpful to spiritual practice, but stillness is what we're after, and that is something we can find in the space that surrounds noise. Father

Thomas Keating speaks of a 'cascading movement toward silence'—letting go of 'exterior noise and then interior noise, and finally letting go of the self by forgetting it'. Early on in our time in Tennessee, I experienced what Father Keating is describing here: the dissolution of self—a sort of deconstruction of the ego. Initially, it worried me. I found myself uncomfortable in the company of other people—afraid they would notice that I didn't have a self, didn't have words. I worried that I might not be able to carry on a conversation. I almost felt a need to apologize for my vacuousness. But as the months passed, I lost the sense that there was anything wrong with this. I noticed that when I was with people, I was more intensely with them, less concerned about myself. (To be concluded)

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# Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda

**Mrs Alice M Hansbrough**

*(Continued from the previous issue)*

**‘D**ID Swamiji give any interviews to any newspapers while he was in Los Angeles?’ Swami Ashokananda asked.

‘Yes, there was an interview published under the title “A Prince from India”. It appeared in some paper, probably a weekly, the name of which I have forgotten. I may be able to get the name of it from Mrs John Schmitz, the doctor’s wife who was our first president in Los Angeles. She is still living there.’

‘Did Swamiji ever tell you anything directly about Divine Mother?’ Swami Ashokananda asked Mrs Hansbrough.

‘Oh yes, he talked a great deal of Divine Mother,’ she replied. ‘He said that she was the receptacle of every germ of religion, and that she was here as a form, but was not tied to that form. She had her desires, he said, but they were related to people. She would reach for people, though they did not know it, and gradually she would draw them to her.’

Swami Ashokananda remarked in the course of the conversation on how gracious Swamiji was. ‘He would not have held on to me as he did if he had not been,’ she remarked. It reminded her of an episode indicative of the way Swamiji had held her in spite of her best efforts to leave him.

‘One day while we were in San Francisco, I finally decided that I was going back to Los Angeles. I chose the day, and had all my bags packed, ready to leave for the train. All at once I heard a voice say: “You can’t go. You might just as well not try.” And for some reason I became completely exhausted—so exhausted that I had to lie down on the floor. I thought of getting some food, but I couldn’t move. And I couldn’t bear to look at the suitcases. So I had to make up my mind not to go.’

‘Did Swamiji say anything to you?’ Swami Ashokananda asked.

‘No, he said nothing. I don’t know whose was the voice I heard speaking to me.’

**Sunday, April 6, 1941**

Sunday morning, April 6, was bright with the spring sun when Swami Ashokananda left the Century Club Building after his lecture, accompanied by Mrs Hansbrough. The drive home this morning was through Golden Gate Park, and the swami had the car parked beside a lake, where ducks and swans swam about on the quiet water.

Swami Ashokananda asked Mrs Hansbrough to tell him about Swamiji’s stay in the flat she had taken with Mrs Aspinall on Turk Street while he had been in San Francisco.

‘We were in the flat on Turk Street about a month,’ Mrs Hansbrough said. ‘There were two rooms which might have been called “parlours”, with a sliding door between them. Next behind was the dining room, then Mrs Aspinall’s room, then the kitchen. There was a kind of hall bedroom at the top of the stairs which was meant, I suppose, for a servant, and I occupied that.’

‘Swamiji’s room was the second of the two parlour rooms. The classes were held in the front parlour, and if there were too many for the single room we would put a screen before the couch Swamiji used as a bed, open the doors into his room, and use both rooms. I think Mrs Aspinall and I paid about forty dollars a month for the flat.’

‘There was one item about the Turk Street flat which was distinctly different from our home in Los Angeles, and which had its amusing side as I look back. This was the bathtub, which was one of



*1719 Turk Street: Swamiji, Mrs Aspinall, and Mrs Hansbrough occupied the top floor*

those old-fashioned things built of zinc. Porcelain tubs were still not in use everywhere, and I had to go over the tub carefully every day with a stone they called a bath brick. Swamiji would ask me regularly if I had washed the tub. He was most particular and exacting about it; and as I recall it now, I think the goings-over that I got about that tub were more for my benefit than the tub's. Swamiji would go on at great length about it.

'One day I scrubbed it three times. After the third time, when he still complained that it was not clean, I said, "Well, I have scrubbed that tub three times, and if you can't bathe in it now, I guess you will have to go without a bath!" So then he let it go and took his bath.

'Both here and before we came north, Swamiji liked to prepare one meal of the day himself, and he often helped with meals. He cooked curries, and especially chapatis, of which Ralph and Dorothy

used to be very fond. He liked the way I cooked rice—in fact, he told me I was the only woman in America who knew how to cook it! In the Turk Street flat he often cooked pulao, that rich dessert made with [rice and ghee]. Sometimes he would cook breakfast; he used to like potatoes cooked in butter with a little curry powder.

'As I have mentioned before, Swamiji used to like to prepare one meal every day while he was at our home in Lincoln Park. Several of the ingredients he used had to be ground, and since he did not like to stand beside a table, he would sit cross-legged on the floor with a wooden butter bowl on the floor in front of him. One day during this ceremony we were talking about his health. Someone suggested that he had a weak heart. "There is nothing wrong with your heart," I told him. "If you mean that," he answered, "I have the heart of a lion!"

'And how did he spend his day while he was in San Francisco? Was his routine about the same as in Los Angeles?' Swami Ashokananda asked.

'Yes, it was just about the same while we were at Turk Street,' Mrs Hansbrough replied. 'When he had no class in the morning we would often go out during the day. Swamiji liked to go to the market with me, and sometimes we would go out for lunch or go for a ride here in Golden Gate Park which he liked. I remember that once Mr Aspinall brought us out in a carriage and we were strolling along. We crossed a bridge onto what proved to be a fairly sizeable island in the midst of a rather swift stream. When we had left the bridge some distance behind

*San Francisco Harbour*





and tried to discover some means of recrossing the stream, Swamiji realized we were on an island, and without thinking to use just that word he tried to indicate the fact to me as he looked about for a means of crossing. Finally when he saw that I had neither caught his meaning nor perceived that the land was an island he remarked, "Well, Madam, I am glad I haven't your brain!"

'Sometimes when he was not lecturing in the evening we would go out to dinner too. He never ate dinner before a lecture; he said it slowed his thinking. He was a hearty eater; in fact, Molly Rankin, one of the housekeepers at the Alameda Home of Truth, said that no person could eat as much as Swamiji did and be spiritual! Lucy Beckham and George Roorbach were quite agreeable, though. And Swamiji demanded what he felt he needed. Once, for example, he said: "See here, I must have meat. I cannot live on potatoes and asparagus with the work I am doing!" So they got meat for him, although they themselves were vegetarians.'

'About how many used to attend Swamiji's classes in the Turk Street flat?' Swami Ashokananda asked.

'I should say they numbered about thirty or forty,' Mrs Hansbrough replied. 'They were held three times a week, the same as his other classes. Swamiji would open the class at ten-thirty, usually with meditation, which often lasted for some time. Then he would speak or discourse on some sacred book. Sometimes he would ask the class what they would like for a subject.

'Swamiji always sat cross-legged on the couch in the front parlour, and when all the chairs were taken people often sat cross-legged on the floor. There was a Mr Wiseman who came to the classes. He was a devoted follower of Miss Bell. He came late once to the class when all the seats were taken, and he had to sit on the floor. In those days the style of men's trousers did not provide the generous leg-room they do nowadays, and Mr Wiseman's trousers were so tight he could not sit cross-legged. Swamiji noticed him sitting with his knees up un-



*A zinc bathtub*

der his chin and suddenly exclaimed: "Don't look like a fool! Come and sit by me!" Mr Wiseman was a quiet, unassuming sort of man and he would have felt it presumptuous to sit on the same couch with Swamiji. But he accepted the invitation and took a seat on the end of the couch.'

'Was any charge made for the classes at Turk Street?' Swami Ashokananda asked.

'No, the classes at Turk Street were free,' Mrs Hansbrough replied. 'We made a charge of one dollar and a half for a series of three classes downtown, however, and had small cards printed.

'Sometimes in these Turk Street classes Swamiji could be very sharp. Once when he was talking of renunciation, a woman asked him, "Well, Swami, what would become of the world if everyone renounced?" His answer was: "Madam, why do you come to me with that lie on your lips? You have never considered anything in this world but your own pleasure!" He told us at another time of a woman in Chicago who had asked him after a class or lecture, "Swami, do you hate all women?" It revealed a characteristic of many of his questioners, that they identified themselves with their question, but couched the question in general terms. I don't remember what Swamiji's answer was.

'Stupid and emotional people apparently gave the Christian ministers excuses for not a little criticism of Swamiji in the Eastern States. The ministers accused him of "separating families". It seems that there was at least one instance, in Detroit, in which a woman divorced her husband and left her chil-



dren with him in order to “renounce the world”.

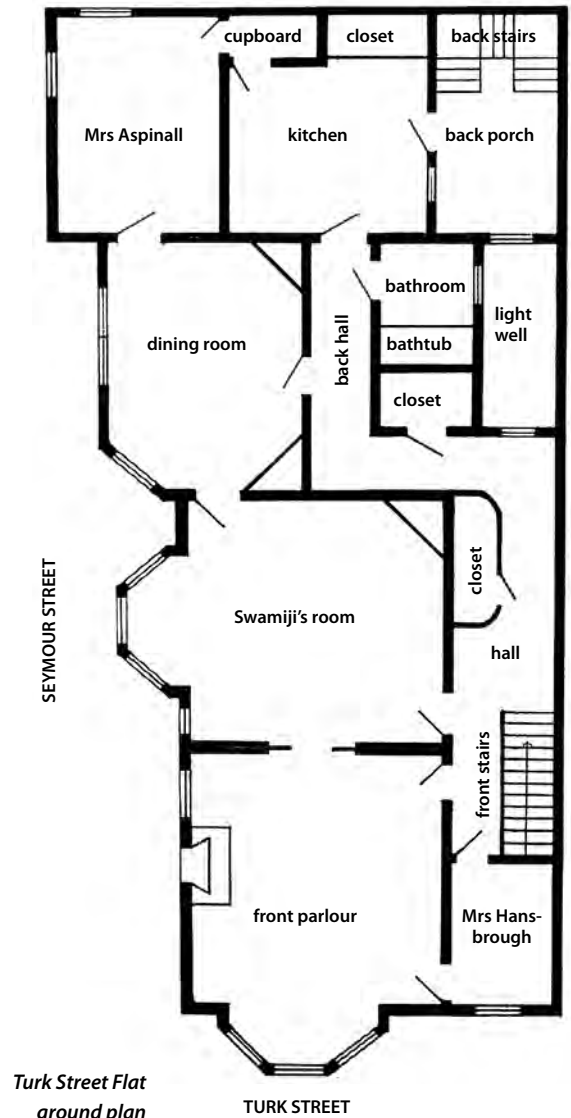
‘Swamiji often was asked questions about going to India, especially by women students. He used to tell them: “If you are going to India to see great yogis, don’t go. You will see only poverty, filth, and misery.”

‘Swamiji was a great one to think out loud when he was at home. That is, as he would talk casually, one had the feeling that this was what he was doing. He liked a listener, however. He would ask us many questions about our family lives, and then would tell us about family life in India.

‘One day when he and I were alone in the Turk Street flat he said: “I have in mind to send my mother a thousand dollars.” I do not remember the details now, but it seems that his mother was involved in some litigation in connection with his father’s estate, and she had appealed to Swamiji’s brother disciple Swami Saradananda, who had written to Swamiji. “Saradananda is an impractical fellow like me,” Swamiji remarked, “but I have written him what to do. In your country a man is allowed to have a mother; in my country I am not allowed. Do you think that is bad?” He was asking if I thought it wrong under these circumstances for him to send his mother money. I replied that it certainly did not seem bad to me, and I believe he did send the money later.’

‘Did Swamiji ever scold you?’ Swami Ashokananda asked.

‘Oh yes, often. He was constantly finding fault and sometimes could be very rough. “Mother brings me fools to work with!” he would say. Or, “I have to associate with fools!” This was a favourite word in his vocabulary of scolding. And though he himself said, “I never apologize”, he would nevertheless come after the scolding was over to find me, and say in a voice so gentle and with a manner so cool that butter and honey would not melt in his mouth, “What are you doing?” It was clear that he was seeking to make amends for the scolding. He used to say, “The people I love most, I scold most”, and I remember thinking he was making a poor kind of apology!



*Turk Street Flat  
ground plan*

‘Going up the steps of a hall in San Francisco before one of his lectures, Swamiji asked me about something I had told him I was going to do. I had neglected to take care of it, and told him I had intended to do it, but had not. “Your intentions are good,” he remarked, “but how like devils you sometimes act!”

‘Once while we were in the Turk Street flat I questioned something about the way Swamiji was handling the work. He did not answer, but simply said, “Within ten years of my death, I will be worshipped as a god!”

‘Once in the Turk Street flat I was dusting after breakfast in the dining room. As I worked, Swamiji

was talking about something. I do not remember now what it was. "You are a silly, brainless fool, that's what you are!" he exclaimed. He continued to scold me heatedly until suddenly Mrs Aspinall appeared and he stopped. I said to him: "Never mind Mrs Aspinall. Swami, if you're not through, just keep right on!"

'Somehow, I never felt hurt by his scoldings. I would often get angry and sometimes would walk out of the room, but usually I was able to hear him through. He used to complain of everything. But he used to say, "If you think I am hard to get along with, you should have travelled with Colville!" Colville was a spiritualist with whom Swamiji travelled when on tour for a lecture bureau during his first visit to the West.

'There was the other side, however. As I have said, after a severe scolding, he would come back and speak in the gentlest of voices. And he could give credit, too, when he chose. On the evening we left the Turk Street flat to go to the Alameda Home of Truth, he was helping me on with my overcoat, and remarked, "Well, you have worked like a demon." I always felt as if he were my very own, a very close relation for whom I had been waiting a long, long time.

'Once at the Turk Street flat Swamiji asked me, "Why can't you join our Order?" He never asked me directly to join, but he did put this question. My answer was that I had my own little world that I had to go back and take care of.'

'Well, how did you go to Alameda that night [Wednesday, April 11, 1900] when you moved from Turk Street?' Swami Ashokananda asked.

'We took the streetcar and then the ferry across the Bay, and probably took the streetcar again on the other side. The three of us went together—Swamiji, Mrs Aspinall, and I—and we probably had dinner before we left San Francisco. Mrs Aspinall and I each had a small suitcase, and Swamiji probably had the same. His trunk with his many clothes in it, I sent by express. I may have packed it for him too, as I often did. About his clothes,



*Cyclists in Golden Gate Park*

he used to say, "In India I can exist on hips and haws and live in rags, but here I want to meet your demands."

'On the streetcar, Swamiji would always sit very straight with his hands, one on top of the other, on the walking stick he carried. He would often sing in a low tone of voice on the car, after he came north from Los Angeles. It was quite a trip across to Alameda, and as I say, I think the last part was on the streetcar too, as there was nothing like a cab service then such as there is now. When we arrived at the Home of Truth we were met in the hall by the teachers, George Roorbach and his wife, Eloise (both of whom were artists), and Miss Lucy Beckham. George Roorbach took Swamiji up to his room on the second floor. It was a fine, big room: the house was a mansion which had been loaned to the Home of Truth by a wealthy family while they were away in Europe. Swamiji was quite comfortable and did get some rest while he was there.'

'How many of our present members who knew Swamiji ever attended the Turk Street classes or visited Swamiji there?' Swami Ashokananda asked.



*Edith Allan*

'I can remember only Mrs Allan at Turk Street,' Mrs Hansbrough said. 'She came for dinner once or twice. The Wollbergs, as I remember, came usually to the Sunday evening lectures downtown.'

*(To be concluded)*

# Household Waste Disposal and Urban Domestic Farming

Swami Nirvikalpananda

IT was a sunny Sunday in October 1999. A practical demonstration session was in progress at the Ramakrishna Mission Samaj Sevak Sikshana Mandira, Belur Math. All of a sudden a polythene packet containing vegetable peelings thrown from one of the flats in the adjacent multi-storeyed building landed on a student. This was not the first time that this had happened. Nor was this a phenomenon specific to this place. Dumping vegetable peelings on nearby roads is common 'flat culture' in large cities. This problem is also not totally unknown in rural areas.

The incident set the social-work students thinking. Earlier persuasion had had little effect on the flat owners. Old habits die hard. And when municipal garbage disposal facilities are inadequate, such problems are an automatic result.

The students remembered Swami Vivekananda's emphatic assertion that struggle is synonymous with life. Social scientists tell us that this struggle takes three forms:

1. Struggle against nature. This can largely be successful through recourse to science and technology.
2. Struggle against other humans. A 'give and take' policy and mutually beneficial adjustments help settle such disputes.
3. Struggle against one's own mind. Cultivation of positive mental attitudes, either through appropriate study, reflection, and contemplation or healthy human interactions is the remedy for these problems.

Here was a problem that involved all three aspects of conflict. Waste generation is an inevitable consequence of all metabolic activity. The crowded living conditions in modern cities result in interpersonal conflicts over disposal of these wastes.

And the ways in which we react to interpersonal disputes is modulated by the levels of personal control and the presence of intrapersonal conflicts. The Samaj Sevaks' response to this situation addressed the problem at all three levels. They had with them a waste-disposal technology appropriate to this problem. They decided to share it with their neighbours. In so doing they addressed the human aspects of this problem.



## Disposal of Kitchen Waste

An average five-member family generates around 1 kg of vegetable waste per day during normal cooking activity. A four-storey multi-flat building thus generates over 15 kg of vegetable waste every day. This is not a negligible volume. Indiscriminate dumping and piling of this waste creates problems of bad odour and serves as a fertile ground for breeding of pathogens as well as vectors involved in disease transmission—flies and rats.

But this waste could easily be transformed into a resource—a resource for urban domestic farming. The ill effects of indiscriminate use of chemicals, hormones, insecticides, and pesticides are well known. But the joys of growing fresh fruits, vegetables, and flowers are virtually unknown to city-dwellers. Organic domestic farming effectively addresses this twin problem besides providing a viable mode of organic-waste disposal.

## Requirements

- 2 covered plastic buckets (10-litre capacity)
- tubs/polysacks as per requirement (old containers could do this job)
- seasonal saplings

### Methodology

One of the 10 litre buckets is to be used for collecting the daily kitchen waste. Once this bucket is full (and this should take about 10 days) the other bucket is to be used for waste collection. Within the next ten days contents of the first bucket will get converted to manure. In dry weather this process may be facilitated by sprinkling small amounts of water inside the closed container to keep the contents moist. In course of time this manure bin attracts moths to lay eggs. These develop into worms that are friendly to this culture and should therefore not be a cause for worry. At the end of twenty days the first bucket is ready for use.

This manure can now be directly transferred to tubs which can then be used to plant saplings from the nursery. No extra soil need be added to the compost in the tubs. An 8–10 inch container is enough to support a tomato or brinjal plant for three months. Regular watering and exposure to sunlight is all that is needed. The compost will tend to shrink with time. Fresh peelings may then directly be added to the tubs. In case of annual plants the tub contents need to be supplemented with two teaspoonfuls of oilcake. In case oilcake is unavailable, 250 ml of the liquid contents remaining in the manure buckets may be used once every fortnight. As the compost is rather loose, the growing plant usually needs to be supported with a stick, and the fruits must be cut rather than plucked in order to prevent uprooting the plant.

### Large-scale Vegetable Waste Disposal

A larger facility is needed for disposal of waste generated in vegetable markets, large housing complexes, hotels and restaurants, and community and marriage halls. This could take two forms: (i) the manure dump and (ii) vermicomposting. The former is

dependent on the fungus *Aspergillus*, which is ubiquitous in the environment. The latter uses earthworms for additional digestion of waste and results in better availability of phosphorus. Both these processes require some free open space for creation of two or more dumps (one ton of biodegradable waste spread out over 100 square feet would result in a 1 foot high dump).

A formal vermicomposting pit could be constructed by walling off a 10 × 10 foot area to a height of 3 feet and dividing this brick tank into four compartments. The size of the tank and the compartments may be adjusted to ensure that each of the compartments takes a full month to fill. The dividing walls must contain enough holes to allow intercommunication between the chambers. The tank must be kept covered to prevent direct exposure to sun and rain. A polythene covered bamboo superstructure could serve this purpose. This process is termed the NADEP method of composting after its originator, Narayan Deo Paranjape.

Each of the four compartments is filled up by turn. The contents must be kept moist by occasional sprinkling with water. By the time the third compartment is being filled (that is, two months from the beginning of filling), the first compartment is ready for vermicomposting by inoculation with *Eisenia foetida* (brandling worm) or *Lumbricus rubellus* (redworm or red wiggler) species of earthworm. These are available from agricultural centres

Four-chamber  
NADEP vermi-  
composting tank,  
and worms, inset





under the supervision of the District Agricultural Development officer. Around a thousand worms are needed for effective functioning of an average-sized tank. Under optimal conditions, the earthworms would be able to convert a whole chamber of partially degraded waste into vermicompost in a month's time. After this, they would themselves migrate to the second chamber in search of more food. So at the end of three months the first compartment is ready to be emptied of its fresh vermicompost. And the cyclical use of compartments

ensures a steady supply of manure. The composting is quickened by addition of a small amount of cow dung—100 grams of *fresh* cow dung dissolved in one litre of water to be added once every seven days to the compartment being currently filled.

If a simple manure dump (without earthworms) is used, then inoculation with activated microbes would hasten composting and also prevent foul odour. The inoculum of activated microbes could be obtained from a local horticulture shop (*Activated Maple EM 1* is one brand). Addition of cow urine (two litres per ton of waste) and covering the heap with a black polythene sheet would also hasten composting by generation and conservation of heat.

Both ordinary- and vermi-compost act as excellent manure. They are especially useful in kitchen gardens, flower beds, and for tub cultivation, and help do away with the use of inorganic chemicals. Used by private individuals or voluntary agencies, vermicomposting can also serve as a useful mode of employment.



The Samaj Sevak trainees have had more friendly environs ever since they shared with their neighbours the idea of in-house waste disposal and domestic gardening. Instead of dumping garbage on them, the neighbours now look to the sevaks for additional supply of waste that could be converted into manure!

PB



*Building a compost dump, left, and rooftop garden, below*



# ***Signs of Hope: Countering Tsunami Effects through Natural Processes<sup>1</sup>***

**M Revathi**

‘**T**HREE things are necessary for great achievements. First, feel from the heart. ... Do you feel? Do you feel that millions and millions of the descendants of gods and of sages have become next-door neighbours to brutes? ... Have you found any way out, any practical solution, some help ... to bring them out of this living death? ... Have you got the will to surmount mountain-high obstructions? ... If you have these three things, each one of you will work miracles. ... Such is the power of thought, of sincerity, and of purity of purpose.’<sup>2</sup> These words of Swami Vivekananda could well describe the attitude of some volunteers in the post-tsunami agricultural land rehabilitation work in Tamilnadu.

The tsunami that struck the southern coast of India on 26 December 2004 was a disaster of a magnitude difficult to grasp. The impact on the coastal communities was immense: in a matter of moments, thousands of families wiped out, all property lost, habitats wiped off the map. The trauma will be felt for at least a couple of generations to come.

Humanitarian aid poured in immediately after the disaster, from across the globe, for the needy fishing communities of the coastal villages, ensuring that relief and rehabilitation works were initiated among these most affected communities and that they could return to their livelihood activity within a short time. However, the plight of the agricultural communities in Nagapattinam, the worst-affected district of Tamilnadu, had almost escaped the observation of most aid agencies, in-

cluding the government, during the initial phase of relief. These small-scale, marginal farmers often had lands within fifty metres of the sea, with shallow ponds on their lands (as any deep well would fetch saline sea water); they had to manually water their crops for four or five hours each day to sustain their agriculture. These farmers were rendered helpless, their lands inundated with saline water from the sea. The sheer magnitude of the disaster rendered them shell-shocked, as it were, and left them feeling utterly hopeless about their future.

## ***Nature's Fury***

In the tsunami-hit agricultural villages, all the land and crops were completely destroyed. Huge amounts of sand, mud, slush, and marine debris were deposited on the land, burying the topsoil with up to three feet of material in some places. The farmers were miserable—shattered—all their low-ground crops were completely gone (burnt), and the high-ground crops could not be invigorated with water since there was no fresh water available; all of it had become completely saline. The trees were also destroyed. Salt deposits on the plants burnt them; the soil and water bodies also became highly saline.

*Tsunami damage: sand and saline deposits*





Green plants nurtured with much love were rendered dry stumps, and paddy that had fully ripened and which would have been harvested in ten days time was rendered stillborn by the tsunami. Future food for the farming community was washed away; so was the fodder kept for the cattle; the seeds preserved for the next season's planting too were washed away; in many cases even the cattle, which were considered members of the family, were washed away.

The salinity EC<sub>e</sub> in the agricultural fields rose from 6.7 to 23.7 dS/m. Many field ponds were inundated with saline water, and in some cases the fields themselves resembled salt pans. In many places the marine deposits were as deep as three feet, making aeration of the topsoil impossible. Seeing the 'visual tragedy' of such fields was too much for some farmers, driving them to mental imbalance.

In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, many 'experts' inspected the fields and predicted that it would take a minimum of ten years for the fields to become normal again. Some advised the farmers to leave their profession, collect government compensation, and vacate their villages. Many farmers seriously contemplated changing their profession—but where would they go, what job would they undertake? They had been farmers all their lives. This brought them to an unforeseen and unenviable conflict. Though the coastal farmers have faced many disasters in the past, the tsunami was more than they could handle. This was an entirely strange and unfamiliar crisis: high salinity. Never

had they faced such a problem, nor did they have any idea how to proceed; all this made the farmers highly depressed.

### **The First Steps**

Tamilnadu Organic Farmers Movement (TOFarM) is a voluntary organization constituted by a group of committed, like-minded youngsters. TOFarM has been campaigning with farmers across the state to adopt organic farming practices and move away from chemical usage in farming. It has also been conducting many workshops and training programmes on the techniques and methods of organic farming among farming communities. This collective believes that no farming hurdle can be so huge that it cannot be overcome through working in tandem with natural forces and in harmony with Mother Nature. TOFarM had been working in Nagapattinam to revive saline and sodic fields for quite some time before the tsunami. A few days after the disaster, some TOFarM volunteers reached the affected communities and started providing support. TOFarM was very particular to know about the post-tsunami agricultural scenario. The team tried to get accurate information about the level of damage suffered by the farming communities. In the initial days following the tsunami, nobody had a clear picture about the agricultural damage; the damage to land and crop was not so easy to assess as damage to boats, buildings, and other such assets.

As relief work got underway, TOFarM learned of a certain village where the villagers were very hesitant to accept any aid from volunteers who

*Disc ploughing, below left, and daincha plantation*



had gone there to distribute food packets, though they too had lost everything in their village. On further investigation it was found that this was a village of proud farmers who had been busily engaged in food production, and who shared their produce with nearby communities. The village, South Poigainallur, was surrounded by sand dunes built by the locals over hundreds of years.<sup>3</sup>

When TOFarM members first visited South Poigainallur, they encouraged the farmers to go and reinspect their fields. They suggested that the natural way of organic farming techniques could be adopted by the villagers to resuscitate and desalinize their fields, and that this could be achieved in about six months using these techniques.

### **Working with Mother Nature**

Our ancestors have left us the wisdom of centuries that working in tandem with nature and utilizing its bountiful resources through constructive means we can achieve favourable results under all circumstances.

The TOFarM team started their work in the fields, and Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund Deutschland (ASB), a partner organization from Germany, came forward to support the villagers financially. First, the debris from the fields was removed, releasing the topsoil. Soil samples were collected and sent to the labs for analysis. The results showed three serious consequences of the tsunami: a high level of salinity, complete collapse of microbial activity, and a pathetic decrease in the level of organic content in the soil.

What followed was a rigorous process of planning, implementation, and review: tapping the local knowledge base; participatory planning with the community; training and awareness to fill in gaps; application of organic practice/technique/method; continuous monitoring and reviews of progress made; constant interaction with the community, government, organic farming experts, and well-wishers; and evaluation of the outcome. The process, evolved through intense discussion and necessarily flexible and innovative on implementation, became

the model for similar work later in other villages.

After removing the enormous quantity of debris from the topsoil, a disc plough was used to plough the fields, to loosen the rock-hard topsoil. Many traditional microbial solutions, developed over generations by organic farmers from across the state—such as *panchagavya*, amrita solution, and effective micronutrient solutions—were shared with the Nagapattinam farmers for them to initiate microbial activity in the soil.<sup>4</sup>

After this, to address the organic needs of the soil, *daincha* seeds were distributed to the farmers. *Daincha* can grow under saline and sodic conditions and gives a very good quantity of biomass. The growth of the *daincha* plant within a few weeks of the tsunami brought hope back into the hearts of the farmers. This crop, locally known as *thakkai poondu*, fixes much-needed nitrogen in the soil. Along with these seeds, farmers were educated about the benefits of using vermicompost and given help in setting up vermi-beds at their homes. Intense work was carried out every day with wholehearted commitment and involvement, which resulted in very quick recovery of the affected fields. Within three months, the *daincha* plants covered the entire field areas and grew up to a height of nine feet. These green plants were incorporated into the soil by rotavator ploughing, thus improving the organic content of the soil.

Some farmers had also planted a few vegetables along with the *daincha* seeds, and could harvest their first crop within a few months after the tsunami. This raised the hopes of neighbouring farmers, and many of them also started earnestly adopting these practices in their fields.

### **The World Takes Note**

The greenery in the village caught the eye of the media, and the visual media projected the achievements of this village far and wide. Doordarshan, the BBC, German Television, and UNESCO among others helped to publicize the work in this village. This evoked international research interest; students from as far as California, Texas, and Michigan vis-



ited the village to gather first-hand understanding of organic land revival after a disaster.

Visitors to the village included the president of India, Dr Abdul Kalam, and former US president and UN Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery Bill Clinton. Learning of the remarkable results, non-governmental organizations from the coastal districts of Indonesia where agricultural lands were similarly affected by the tsunami invited the TOFarM team to visit their country to implement similar solutions there too.

A few optimistic farmers from another agricultural village in Nagapattinam called Thirunagari got to hear of TOFarM's experience and requested them to visit their village and provide them with guidance too.

The TOFarM team accepted this invitation, reached Thirunagari village, conducted initial soil tests, and assessed the extent of the damage to the agricultural lands.<sup>5</sup> Then the villagers were mobilized for a meeting during which remedial measures were discussed. This proved to be very difficult, as already six or seven months had passed since the tsunami: many farmers had already tried various methods of land revival and had given up by then; they could not share the optimism of their brethren. A small group was then taken to other organic farms in the vicinity; seeing these successful farms, the group members became motivated to adopt a few of these practices and also to motivate others in the village.

This strategy worked: the farmers returned to their village and immediately started work. The impending monsoon was to be fully utilized. To ensure that the agricultural lands were revived, a team was formed to oversee all the operations. Disc and rotor ploughs were pressed into service. When the tractor owners demanded higher pay, sensing that this was their opportunity to make some fast money, the village team met and spoke with them and co-opted them into the work at a nominal cost. Many agricultural labourers who had migrated from the village for alternate employment heard of the happenings and returned to participate in this village venture.

Many women labourers learned to set up vermicomposting units with earthworms, which started producing valuable compost. To drain saline water from the land, trenches were dug and filled with palm fronds and branches. This traditional method of leaching out saline water was introduced to the villagers by TOFarM. The lands were ploughed and then sown after prayers were offered at the famous Kalyana Ranganathar temple situated in the village. When the paddy grew well in the soil almost given up on by them, many from neighbouring villages borrowed saplings for transplanting.

The crops grew bountifully; however, just a few days before the much-awaited harvest, the monsoon struck as though with vengeance. The fields were yet again inundated, this time with rainwater that poured almost incessantly. The farmers who had lost the previous crop to the tsunami were heartbroken to watch yet another standing crop being destroyed in front of their eyes. After taking many measures like clearing drainage canals and raising bunds, the excess of rainwater was drained from the fields. As the rainwater had stagnated in the paddy fields for more than ten days, the fields were very slushy, and the young paddy struggled very much for air as well as to take in nutrition through its roots.

The TOFarM team found this to be the reason for the plants slowly turning yellow and withering away. Having identified the cause, they suggested to the farmers a traditional remedy from an ancient scripture, the *Vrikshayurveda* (plant medicine), called *gunapasallam* (*kunapa*: parts of dead animals; *jalam*: water), a concoction prepared by mixing fish waste (very cheaply available in bulk in the coastal belt) with water, cow urine, and other ingredients and sprinkled as foliar spray on top of the plants to provide them nutrition through the arial route (stomata) when the roots fail to feed the crops. With this application, when the crop heads that had sunk deep down after being lashed by the rain water started standing up, the farmers yet again regained hope, and the village moved towards a possible harvest. When sackfuls of paddy and groundnut were harvested, the joy in the



*Celebrating  
harvesting  
and the Pongal festival*



village knew no bounds. It was nothing short of miracle, performed not through any magic, but by working with nature, by applying the wisdom that working in cooperation with natural forces always bears better fruits.

On 10 February 2006, the village celebrated a harvest festival like no other. The leaseholders of the local temple's land returned their lease amount in the form of paddy—more than twenty-four tonnes—for the first time in ten years, increasing the villagers' joy. It was a proclamation by an inspired people that this is a society that produces in plenty and shares with the world, that even today it is possible to revive the spirits of ordinary disaster-ravaged people—the people who, in the past, did great things, and who, whenever there was a call, would rise like a phoenix.

In the TOFarM team's perspective, the essence of their whole programme lies in bringing back confidence to the communities that by living together with nature, by observing and understanding the messages it delivers, anything and everything is possible—even recovering from an enormous disaster like the tsunami.

'Give them ideas—that is the only help they require, and then the rest must follow as the effect. Ours is to put the chemicals together, the crystallisation comes in the law of nature. Our duty is to put ideas into their heads, they will do the rest.'<sup>6</sup> These words of Swami Vivekananda are proved by the events in these villages. People are coming to appreciate the superior wisdom of their ancestors: the value of using traditional varieties of seeds and relying on locally and naturally developed farming methods. This civilization had always celebrated

farm work as *agri-culture* rather than mere agribusiness. These village people have embarked on the journey to rediscover those values. Let us pray for their success.



### Notes and References

1. This is a modified version of the author's article *Eyarkayodu eyaintirundu tsunami vilaivugalai samalitta sadhanai*, which appeared in *Sri Ramakrishna Vijayam*, July 2006.
2. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 3, 225–7.
3. The local tradition is to deposit the sand extracted from farm ponds on the shore and to plant palm fronds as a 'break' against the sand that would be blown in from the sea. When the sand deposits grow taller, the locals plant binding plants such as *ravan ka moonch*, *nochhi*, *punnai*, and palm trees that hold the sand deposits together. In villages such as South Poigainallur, there were sand dunes up to thirty feet high, one half kilometre wide, and more than six kilometres long. These prevented the tsunami waves from destroying the village, and miraculously saved lives. The villages on both sides of this village were the worst affected, with more than two thousand mortalities, whereas in South Poigainallur, only two people died.
4. Despite the protective dunes, South Poigainallur was affected by the tsunami. Greedy merchants from nearby villages had removed some portions of the sand dunes in a few places for building beach resorts, and seawater entered the village through these gaps in the dunes.
5. *Panchagavya* is a fermented solution prepared with five products of the cow: dung, urine, milk, curd (yoghurt), and ghee. Amrita solution is a fermented mixture of cow dung, cow urine, and jaggery.
6. The financial assistance for the work in this village was provided by the international funding agency Oxfam, UK.
7. *Complete Works*, 4, 362.



# Kanchipuram, The Four-fold Glory: Jina Kanchi

**Dr Prema Nandakumar**

(Continued from the previous issue)

**I**F the Buddha Kanchi of yore cannot be pinpointed today, Jina Kanchi, fortunately, has to itself a hallowed area where two temples have stood witness to the rise and fall of dynasties for over a millennium. Jainism seems to have come to Tamil Nadu even earlier than Buddhism because it is associated with Chandragupta Maurya's retirement in Karnataka. It is widely believed that when his kingdom was devastated by a famine, Chandragupta renounced his throne on the advice of his spiritual preceptor Bhadrabahu and travelled to South India. Settling down in Karnataka, he is said to have taken to *sallekhana* (the Jain ascetic tradition of giving up one's body by renouncing movement and eating). The work of master and disciple in furthering the cause of Jainism in South India must have been very deep indeed. The place where they stayed became the Shravanabelagola of later times with the erection of the magnificent monolithic statue of Gomateshwara. Jainism spread well and seems to have entered Kanchipuram not long after Chandragupta's passing.

Though the age of Jainism in Tamil Nadu has not been exactly determined, it does have a very ancient presence stretching back to the Sangam era. The monks belonging to the religion were known as *samanas* (from Sanskrit *shramana*) and the householders as *savakas* (or *shravakas*). Because the monks were an obvious visible presence as teachers, the pathway came to be known as the Samana religion. The monasteries were known as Samana palli (like the Buddhist vihara) and functioned as organized educational institutions. Kanchipuram, being the capital of the Tondaimandalam area (which once included Chennai, Tiruvellore, Vellore, and Tiruvannamalai) was not insulated from this sweep

of Jainism all through South India.

The Pallava king Simhaviśnu, who ruled from Kanchipuram, was a follower of Vaishnavism, but he did not look down upon other religions. His son Mahendravarman (seventh century) was drawn to Jainism early in life. The wonderful cave temple at Sittannavasal is attributed to his munificence. Located in the Pudukottai area, the cave has frescoes on Jain spiritual themes like the Samavasarana (divine pavilion) Lake. It is significant that Mahendravarman's drama, *Matta-vilasa-prahasana*, which is a satire on the ways of the Pashupatas, the Kapalikas, and the Buddhists, avoids any criticism of Vaishnavism, popular Shaivism, or Jainism.

Literature has kept alive some of Jainism's old connections with Tondaimandalam. The author of the Jain epic *Chulamani* is associated with Karvetinagar near Tirupati. At a distance of ten miles from Kanchipuram is Tirupanambur, where the Jain acharya Akalanka lived. He is said to have defeated the Buddhists in a debate in the court of King Himasitala of Kanchi. The eminent Jain commentator Suranandi lived in Tiruparuttikunram. *Merumandara Puranam* is the legend of the two assistants of the thirteenth Tirthankara, Vimalanatha. This narrative in thirteen cantos about the princes Meru and Mandara is attributed to Mallisena Vamana (fourteenth century) who lived in Kanchipuram. The impressions of his feet and those of his disciple Pushpasesha are honoured in the Chandraprabha temple at Tiruparuttikunram in Kanchi. Mallisena's Purana upholds Jain thought with crystalline clarity:

If you wish to act, perform dharma.  
If you wish to renounce, renounce anger.  
If you wish to see, look at knowledge.  
If you wish to guard, protect your vows.



Curiously, the work firmly states that women cannot achieve realization:

Those placed in the four states of being due to fate

By their inner aspiration are born as humans,  
And perform charity, worship, and tapasya,  
And get beyond the states to moksha: not so women.

Mallisenā has also written a commentary for the epic *Nilakesi*. Udisi Devar, who authored *Tirukkalampakam* and *Arungalacheppu*, was the head of Arpakai village in Tondaimandalam. His *Tirukkalampakam* is an amazing attempt to take in the whole of the religious symbolism of his time and make them all represent the Arhat. He is Shiva, Brahma, Muruga, the lord who rested in the midst of the milky ocean, and even Shakti. Towards the end, Udisi Devar speaks in a voice which must have gone down well with the devotees, for already the Jain pantheon had a vast array of gods and goddesses:

Praising the beloved of the Lord,  
The mother who gave birth to this earth,  
Eternal Virgin, the goddess who sustained  
Dharma; from her have blossomed forth  
The six religions; the Self-create;  
The one lamp illumining creation;  
One who is an enemy to the disease of our birth;  
The divine foster-mother who gives unstintingly  
Her compassion to all living beings;  
The chaste one who speaks in sublime accents;  
A creeper of ananda; a flame of wisdom;  
The medicine that cures the fever of the senses.  
Thus do the tapasvins praise, when they worship  
The auspicious feet of the Arhat.

No wonder one who is used to worshipping in Hindu temples does not feel a stranger in *jinālayas*. Unlike Buddhism, the Jain religion seems to have given a very important place to temple worship. Jain temples, and the rituals held therein, are described in epics like *Jivaka Chintamani* and *Chu-*

*lamani*. While the former has detailed descriptions of temples to the Arhat and even of a Kama Kotam (temple to Kama), the latter has a 'Canto on Renunciation' in which King Bayapati conducts worship in a Jina temple with scent, flowers, and water. He circumambulates the sanctum and recites a ten-verse prayer to the Arhat. While Vedic religion gave importance to yajna, and Buddhism frowned upon image worship, Jainism was for the

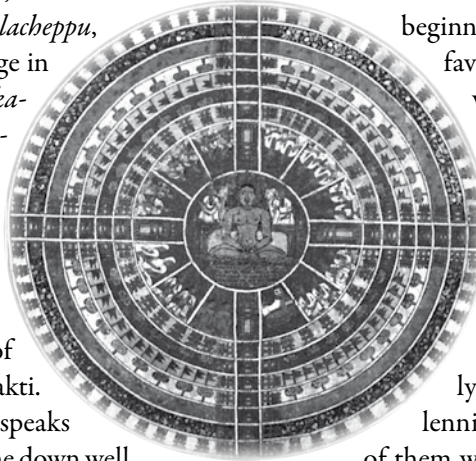
consecration of holy images from the very beginning. Stone and metal were the favourite media; the paintbrush was also wielded with finesse.

The first in the field, the Jains mastered sculpture and metal casting over two millennia ago, making the *jinālayas* treasure troves of devotional art.

Such temples were obviously innumerable in the first millennium. Today one goes in search of them with almost a hopeful hopelessness clutching one's heart, remembering the poem by Sister Nivedita:

We hear them, O Mother!  
Thy footfalls,  
Soft, soft, through the ages  
Touching earth here and there,  
And the lotuses left on Thy footprints  
Are cities historic,  
Ancient scriptures and poems and temples,  
Noble strivings, stern struggles for Right.

Ah, it is our good luck that we have intact two temples of Jain Tirthankaras built in the ninth century in Tiruparuttikunram, near Kanchipuram. One is a temple to the eighth Tirthankara Chandraprabha, and it is believed that Nandivarman Pallavamalla, king of Kanchipuram, built it. The adjacent Trailokyanatha temple has Mahavira as the main deity in the sanctum. Apparently the land was gifted to the Jain community by King Simhavishnu and his queen as early as the fifth century. Much later, Parakesarivarman Chola and Kulo-



A samavasarana





*Sri Trailokyanatha*

thunga Chola granted whole villages to Jina Kanchi. Emperor Krishnadeva Raya, who did much to save Hinduism from Islamic depredations, also contributed handsomely to the temple to help restoration works in the seventeenth century.

As I get to see these temples, I find it hard to believe that they are under the control of the Archaeological Survey of India. An ancient lady, Padma, seems to be the caretaker; she willingly opened the main entrance after asking us sternly to deposit our cameras back in our car, while loudly complaining about how difficult it was to keep stray cattle and prowlers from entering the temple and desecrating them. The main door opens to a vast *parikrama* (circumambulatory corridor) and immediately before me is a *dhvajastambha* (flagstaff) and *balipitha* (sacrificial altar). Going up a few steps we come to the Sangita Mandapam (musical hall) established by Irusappar, a Jain monk. The ceiling, held up by four rows of pillars, is full of paintings. Craning my neck upwards, I gaze at an astonishing sight. Though many of the paintings are faded, there are still plenty of them that create an illusion of movement: so many young women walking, young men carrying pitchers, elephants, horses. There is the painting of a Samavasarana lake in which the devout bathe before proceeding to listen to the wise. At the very centre of the huge circular lake, with four stepped pathways converging from the four directions, is the seated figure of the acharya. There are also serial paintings depicting incidents from

Mahavira's life. Some of the paintings seemed to be about the life of Dhivittan depicted in *Chulamani*. Dhivittan's life has close resemblance to the saga of Krishna.

Wedged between the mandapam and the sanctum is the strong room where several ancient images of Arhats made of marble or bronze have been kept in safe custody. Some of the images are of gods and yakshis of Jain theology. The temple has huge open spaces, and a shrine nearby has the image of Arhat Pushpadanta installed in its sanctum. Going around the temple, one may well visualize King Bayapati's reverence as he intoned the *Chulamani* prayer:

You have spread as light, this earth;  
The earth is enveloped in your light.  
Your reign brings grace to living beings;  
Even the world of gods seeks your feet;  
You have explained the eternal Truth;  
Truth blossomed forth according to your will.  
Recognizing the glory of your feet is Truth.  
Once this is known, all else becomes clear.

In this context it would be well to remember Munipadiyar's *Ananericharam*, which has a verse that sought to clear the confusion in the minds of common people regarding various religions, at a time when temple structures were coming up very fast:

Do not worry that He is this person, or that.  
Meditate upon Shiva. The god Shiva  
And the Lord with the triple umbrella  
Beneath the shade of the Ashoka tree  
Are both the same.

There is then the prayer from *Tottira Tirattu* (Anthology of Prayers) dedicated to the Arhat at the Trailokyanatha temple:

As the immortals ruling over the skies,  
As the sub-humans in charge of the netherworlds,  
As humans who enter the prison of the womb,  
As animals and as ever so many forms  
Have I taken birth for a long, long time  
And suffered; I have now reached your temple  
Auspicious, hoping to be rid of this cycle of birth.  
O Mountain of molten gold  
At holy Tiruparuttikunram near Kanchi!

(To be continued)

# REVIEWS

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA,  
publishers need to send **two** copies of their latest publications.



## ***Devimahatmyam: In Praise of the Goddess***

Trans. and Comm. Devadatta  
Kali

Motilal Banarsidass, 41 U A Bungalow  
Road, Jawahar Nagar, Delhi 110 007. E-  
mail: [mlbd@vsnl.com](mailto:mlbd@vsnl.com). 2003. xx + 382 pp.  
Rs 250.

There are some scriptures that are perpetually in the recitation mode for common men and women. *Devimahatmyam* is one such text. This is because, besides its mantric reverberations, the narration is free of philosophical ambiguities. It speaks in unmistakable terms of victory secured over demonic forces by the Divine Mother. What more does a person burdened with the toil and tragedy of human fate desire? I have heard *Devimahatmyam* recited (and explained) by great authorities on Tantra; by a *pravrajika* engaged in worship at a Vivekananda retreat in a Western country; and also by unlettered old women in Indian villages. The vibrations never fail to engulf the listener, and astonishingly, it is the same when one reads a printed volume.

Devadatta Kali's book is handy and has been produced with a fond attention to detail—with notes, glossary, bibliography, and index. And the verse-by-verse commentary which draws upon a variety of unimpeachable sources is extremely lucid. This book will certainly capture an important place on our shelves. The original Sanskrit verses along with English transliteration add to the tome's appeal. The author makes it clear at the outset that we are not in the grip of a feverish imagination: 'The sage's three tales are allegories of outer and inner experience, symbolized by the fierce battles the all-powerful Devi wages against throngs of demonic foes. Her adversaries represent the all too human impulses arising from the pursuit of power, possessions, and pleasure, and from illusions of self-importance' (xvii).

He then provides the reader with a historical note on the worship of the Mother Goddess, the Vedic hymns on goddesses, and the Puranic pres-

ence that has led to an awesome amount of literature categorized as Tantra. The author rightly feels that the Puranas, by using colourful myths and allegories, 'gave popular access to the abstract truths of the Vedas and Upanishads, and in doing so, harmonized the path of jnana and bhakti—of spiritual knowledge and devotion' (12). The *Devimahatmya* is part of the *Markandeya Purana* and is in essence the teachings of the rishi Medha to a deposed king and a dispossessed merchant. The subject is the Mother Goddess and her various emanations, including the one known as Mahamaya.

Devadatta studies various canons regarding the Devi and finds the world as no illusion but 'an actual transformation of divinity'. The movement from the human to the divine needs help, and the Mother Goddess is the wonderful fire that makes this possible. This fire—call it Durga, Vindhyavasini, or Mahishasuramardini—burns up the external and internal evils that beset humankind and leads the race towards the state of supreme bliss.

The commentary is exhaustive with virtually every word taken up for study, and we get goblets of wisdom distilled from earlier philosophers and commentators. It is not surprising that all these studies have made the author meaningfully eloquent: 'On one level, the *Devimahatmya* is an allegory of the spiritual journey; on another it is a blueprint of the soul' (31). The work helps us journey within, and in our own inner spaces find our naked ego lumbering as Shumbha, our clouded intellect luring as Dhumralochana, our craving to grasp all that we can lay our hands upon acting as Raktabija. And to think that the Divine Mother is always ready to come to cleanse her child of all these evil qualities makes us feel humble.

*Devimahatmyam: In Praise of the Goddess* is an enviable attempt at perfection in presenting a sacred text. The *Saptashati Durga* is assuring us of the Mother's protection. All that we need to do is to remember the millions who have placed their faith in Chandi before our time and the spiritual luminaries like Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Sri Sarada Devi, and Sri Aurobindo who have been guided by this vic-

tory hymn to enter the realms of God consciousness. There is no space or experience that is not inundated by the Divine Mother: *nityaiva sã jaganmūrtis-tayā sarvamidaṁ tatam* (1.64). So what is it that we need fear when Devadatta Kali's *Devimahatmyam* has reached our hands?

Dr Prema Nandakumar

Researcher and Literary Critic, Srirangam



**Experiencing the Soul: Before Birth, During Life, After Death**  
Ed. Eliot Jay Rosen

Motilal Banarsidass. 2006. xxvii + 280 pp.  
Rs 250.

**W**e humans, the legendary *Homo sapiens*, are well-known for our undaunted spirit of enquiry. We want to know (i) what we can perceive with our senses; (ii) what we hope to perceive with *aided* senses; (iii) what we glimpse through our intuition; and (iv) what we know in deep meditative contemplation but cannot completely place within the boundaries of classical logic and rationality.

The soul is an object (or should we call it a 'subject-object' duplex!) that has been placed now here, now there, among the four groups mentioned above. It is both known (to a few of us) and unknown; it is both enchanting and frustrating, both all-pervasive and outside our 'space-time', both the nearest thing and an unreachable entity, both very certain and tantalizingly difficult to pin down. What it surely does is draw our interest.

Conceived and edited by the dedicated soul-researcher Eliot Jay Rosen, this book is a compilation of articles by writers from an assortment of disciplines and walks of life—an Academy Award-winning actress, thanatologist-psychiatrists, Aids survivors, transformational speakers, pre-birth experience researchers, physicists, sociologists, psychologists and psychotherapists, yogis, exceptional personalities such as the Dalai Lama and Mother Teresa, other spiritual leaders, an astronaut, and a noetic scientist.

The key word here is Existence. 'Soul' is just another name for Existence. The contributors to this volume tell us that this Existence is sometimes encased (and enslaved—in the words of Sir Oliver Lodge: 'Death leads the imprisoned King free') in a sheath made of matter (the body), and at other times it remains as mere Existence, without the covering.

The act of shedding this material body is called death. The essence, Being, or Existence is always there, omnipresent. It has its own 'laws', own ways of acting, own targets.

Some of the essays in the book are personal experiences of writers about the chain of moments around the phenomenon we call death; some others have added their reflective awareness about the process of death—about feelings that are present in life after death as recorded in introspective accounts of death-returnees—and still others are critical, logical essays on the nature of the material world and the extra-material realm. Previously, the extra-material was made available to enquirers through the teachings of wise and enlightened savants, those who had the courage and capacity to build such fascinating systems of thought as Samkhya and Vedanta. Today, theoretical physics has extended its arms to venture beyond the apparently all-pervading ocean of matter (and space); it now dares to touch the realm of non-matter, the domain of pure Existence.

The book also discusses two other extremely pertinent issues: (i) the horror of death that paralyses most of us and the agony that the death-bed on-lookers project on the dying individual; and (ii) the tormenting grief of losing an (apparently) very real, solid, and dear person. But the book tries to tell us that what we lose in death is just a matter-made morphic identity, that death or transition is a part that Existence plays (or likes to play), and that nothing more (or valuable) is lost than a worn out garment (*jirna vasa*, as the Gita calls the disintegrating body). The contributors repeatedly remind us that we get drowned in grief because we do not see (or understand) what is *not lost*, what cannot be lost—the Existence.

But why can the majority of us not see what remains, what can never be destroyed, deformed, dried up, soaked? It is simply because we have not practised the art of 'seeing' this Existence. The average human is so engrossed in matter that he or she cannot see, cannot even look for (let alone understand) anything that is not matter. Whether there really is Existence beyond this material body was a question that troubled the boy saint Nachiketa (in the *Katha Upanishad*); and that was thousands of years before we had such books as this one.

Today we do not have to travel to Yama and wait for three days to get an answer to the question of Existence. We may not come across a teacher of Yama's calibre, but in books like this we have something that

at least speaks our language, the logic that we hope to understand, and the answers that more or less resolve our doubts in this matter.

*Prof. Somnath Bhattacharyya*

Former Head, Department of Psychology  
University of Calcutta



### **What India Should Know**

V Lakshmikantham and  
J Vasundhara Devi

Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, K M Munshi  
Marg, Mumbai 400 007. E-mail: *brbha  
van@bom7.usnl.net.in*. 2006. xx + 308 pp.  
Rs 250.

**H**istory is not merely a passive record of past events. It is a record of ideas and events that have made an impact on human consciousness and have thereby moulded and shaped the thinking of people. The tragedy with ancient Indian history is that much of it remains shrouded in the mist of antiquity. This has led to the spawning of many hypotheses, often with intentions that are beyond the ambit of unbiased scholarship. The result has been catastrophic, as Indians seem to be left with little to be proud of, to derive inspiration from, or to build a uniquely Indian national life upon.

This book is about what Indians should know about themselves, the glory of their race, religion, culture, and heritage. It is intended to remove misgivings about the superiority of the Indian race in every field of human life. The authors, reputed mathematicians from the Florida Institute of Technology, have done their homework thoroughly; this is adequately reflected in the bibliography that runs to several pages.

The authors scorn the pedagogic divisions of East and West and are convinced that such a bifurcation is a myth. Contrary to general practice, they portray a flow of people from India to the West, something that happened long before the advent of Greek civilization, which is inaccurately considered the seat of European culture. Western culture, according to them, is a polyglot affair, put together from different sources over time, with little intrinsic originality.

In contrast stands India, the seat of a culture that continues to flourish even today. The authors would like to call it Sanatana Dharma, the perennial fount of eternal or universal truths, which is nothing but a set of principles that comprehend universal life and consciousness, and include yoga, mysticism, philoso-

phy, art, language, and literature. The Vedas are the source of this ancient yet living tradition.

Interestingly, the authors have tried to defend many claims of our ancient scriptures with regard to geography, history, and chronology which have been dismissed by Western thinkers as fantasy. The Aryan invasion theory, which was once considered the bedrock of Indian studies, is subjected to a searching critique. The glory of Vedic society, the rich heritage of India's spiritual and secular literature, the continuity of ancient Indian culture right up to this day—all these have been precisely and vividly presented in a spirit of challenge to those who still hold on to Western ways of looking at Indian history.

It is the past which shapes one's future. The authors are emphatic in their assertion that Indians should derive inspiration from the excellent entrepreneurial spirit of their forefathers. We should study and utilize our sacred scriptures not only in our spiritual endeavour, but also in shaping our society to meet the challenges of the future. In this regard, the intention of the authors is clearly spelt out in the following lines: 'Our educational system needs a change from its western orientation of replicative and applicative knowledge to that of our hoary past, meta-cognitive knowledge' (255); 'A civilization is kept alive only when its past values and traditions are recreated in the minds of the people, faithfully and thoroughly, without the elements of fancy and distortion' (259).

Though this effort deserves our heartfelt appreciation, we should always guard against the extreme tendency of making too much of our past without considering its ramifications in the present. Our past can only be a beacon for the present. Any attempt to exaggerate it will have disastrous consequences.

*Swami Vireshananda*

Ramakrishna Ashrama, Mysore

## **BOOK RECEIVED**



**Goswami Tulsidas'**

**Vinai-Patrika**

Comp. and Trans. Ajai Kumar  
Chhawchharia

36A Rajghat Colony, Parikrama Marg,  
PO Ayodhya, 224 123. 2005. xii + 448 pp.  
Rs 100.

Original Avadhi text with English translation, brief commentaries, and appendices.



# REPORTS

## **Ramakrishna Order Appointments**

**T**HE Trustees of Ramakrishna Math, Belur, and the Governing Body of the Ramakrishna Mission have appointed Srimat Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj a Vice President of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. Swami Prabhanandaji Maharaj has been appointed the General Secretary, and Swami Suviranandaji an Assistant Secretary of the twin organizations. They assumed their new posts on 2 May 2007, the sacred Buddha Purnima day.

## **Math and Mission Receive Rumi Award**

The M Jalaluddin Rumi International Award for Universal Peace, Tolerance, and Harmony, 2006, was awarded to the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission by Interfaith Harmony Foundation of India, in collaboration with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. Swami Gautamanandaji, President, Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, received the award, consisting of a citation, on behalf of the Math and Mission from Dr Karan Singh, President, Indian Council for Cultural Relations, on 22 April, the second day of a two-day function organized at India Islamic Cultural Centre, New Delhi.

## **Ramakrishna Mission in Durban**

The **Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa, Durban**, was founded in 1942 by Sri Dhanagopal Naidoo. In 1949, Naidoo went to India and was initiated by Swami Virajananda at Belur Math. Thereafter, he was given the vows of sannyasa by Swami Purushottamananda of Vasishta Guha, Rishikesh, who was a disciple of Swami Brahmananda, the first president of the Ramakrishna Order. Known thereafter as Swami Nischalananda, he returned to South Africa in 1953, and by 1959 he was able to establish an ashrama in Glen Anil, Durban, on 14



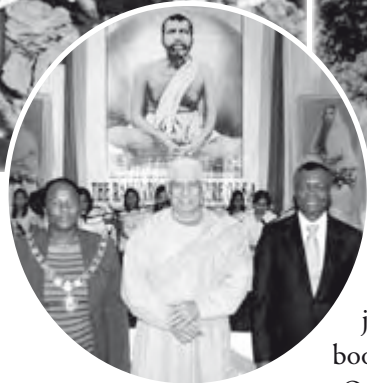
acres of land. This ashrama is now the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Centre.

The swami was a pioneer, spreading the teachings of Vedanta in South Africa through prayer services, lectures, retreats, and seminars; he also printed and disseminated literature, organized medical relief operations, distributed food and clothing to the needy, and participated actively in flood and disaster relief work. He worked closely with the black community. He also founded Sri Sarada Devi Ashram in Asherville, Durban, which maintains a convent for women monastics and services for women devotees. Nischalanandaji passed away at the young age of 40 in 1965; he was succeeded by Swami Shivapadananda, who ably led the centre until his passing in 1994. Swami Saradanandaji next led the centre until its affiliation with the Ramakrishna Mission. On 27 March, Swami Vimokshanandaji took over as secretary of the institution.

Today, the centre has 14 branches; 5 branches, namely Chatsworth, Ladysmith, Lenasia, Newcastle, and Pietermaritzburg, have shrines dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna, and other facilities. The rest of the branches and satsang groups operate from local temples and schools. There are also unaffiliated groups receiving close guidance from the centre.

The centre has a long history of humanitarian activities. Its Feeding Scheme, initiated by Swami Nischalananda in 1953, has played an important role in alleviating hunger and suffering among children and adults in many communities. Working through schools and a wide range of organizations,

*Swami Gautamananda, right, accepts the Rumi Award on behalf of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission from Dr Karan Singh, left; Dr Khwaja Ahmed stands in the centre*



Above, community agriculture project; top right, the Durban Ashrama from above; inset, Swami Vimokshananda with Councillor Dudu Mazibuko to his right and Chief Justice P N Langa

the scheme has been able to reach poor, destitute, unemployed, abused, and disabled people. The centre's branches play an important role in welfare activities in their respective areas.

The Nutrition Programme provides meals every school day for approximately 6,000 children in 35 schools, mainly in Phoenix, Kwa Mashu, and Inanda. Requests for assistance from other areas are also given attention.

More than 1,000 families are provided with groceries, toiletries, vegetables, and the like, which are distributed through established organizations to ensure that assistance reaches those with the greatest need.

Agricultural projects in rural areas (kitchen gardens, community farms, nutrition-education, etc.) are conducted in poverty-afflicted areas with the aim of providing food and making people self-sufficient. Job creation projects for disadvantaged students and adults include classes in computer studies and agriculture. To date the centre has assisted approximately 94 schools. In addition, toilets, borewells, and classrooms have been built in previously disadvantaged areas.

The centre played a very important role in providing relief for victims of floods that occurred during November 1999–January 2000. Over one ton of rice, toiletries, clothing, and other necessities was distributed through several of its branches, and

through other non-governmental and community-based organizations.

The centre publishes a quarterly English journal, *Jyoti*, now in its 53rd year, and also booklets in Zulu and Afrikaans.

On 15 April, over three thousand devotees and well-wishers of the movement assembled at the Ladysmith Indoor Sports Stadium to accord a warm welcome to Swami Vimokshananda and to observe the centre's 65th anniversary celebrations in a multicultural and multiracial function. Among the many dignitaries present was Justice P N Langa, Chief Justice of the Republic of South Africa, who was the chief guest.

### ***Vrindaban Sevashrama: 100 Years of Service***

The Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Vrindaban, was founded in 1907 by Brahmachari Harendranath and Jnaneshwar Chandra Sen, two men inspired by Swami Vivekananda's message to worship God through service to humanity. On 12 January 1908, the sevashrama was affiliated to the Ramakrishna Mission. The hospital was inaugurated at its present location in 1963 by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.

Today, the sevashrama runs a modern charitable hospital with 165 beds, and departments in general medicine, general surgery, ophthalmology, ENT, orthopaedics, dentistry, paediatrics, gynaecology and obstetrics, pathology, radiology, physiotherapy, homeopathy, and yoga and ayurvedic medicine. The ICU, operation theatres, and other departments are equipped with state-of-the-art diagnostic and life-support equipment. In 2005–6, there were 11,985 inpatients, 205,718 outpatients, 19,219 patients served by the mobile medical unit, 8,726



*Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Vrindaban, above, and students at the School of Nursing, left*

patients on homeopathic treatment, and 19,523 on ayurvedic treatment. All medical services at the hospital, and those given through the mobile medical unit, are offered free of charge. Other activities include a school of nursing and general relief and welfare for local people. The sevashrama activities are conducted without any recurring financial aid from the central or state government; the sevashrama depends on voluntary contributions.

The final phase of the centenary celebrations of the sevashrama will be held from 11–15 January, 2008.

## Relief

**Refugee Relief:** **Ramakrishna Mission, Batticaloa**, continued relief operations among thousands of families who have moved to Batticaloa district owing to ethnic disturbances in Sri Lanka. The ashrama provided food items to 2,634 persons for 31 days and a set of garments each to 400 boys and 640 girls. 840 people were given medical treatment in different camps.

**Cholera Relief:** The Headquarters Office of the Ramakrishna Mission conducted cholera relief operations through 3 camps in the Bhote Bagan

area of Bally Municipality for 3 days. 709 cholera patients were treated in the camps, and 5,000 halazone tablets and 2,000 ORS (oral rehabilitation salts) packets were distributed to 500 families.

**Fire Relief:** **Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Malda**, distributed 30 kg chira, 75 kg gur, 890 kg rice, 100 kg dal, 325 kg vegetables, 50 kg salt, 300 packets of biscuits, 4,000 leaf plates, and 4,000 plastic glasses to 130 families whose houses were gutted by a devastating fire in Sirsi, Kalaibari, Habibpur block, Malda district.

**Distress Relief:** The following centres of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission distributed various items to poor and needy persons of nearby areas: Aalo (300 blankets), Antpur (500 blankets), Bhubaneswar (500 blankets, 434 saris, 233 kg milk powder), Guwahati (200 blankets, 20 kg milk, 3 sewing machines, 4 weaving machines), Jalpaiguri (100 dhotis, 350 saris), Ootacamund (300 blankets), Rahara (60 saris, 7 dhotis, 20 sets of pants and shirts, 25 frocks, 40 mosquito nets).

**Ramakrishna Mission Boys' Home, Rahara**, sank a tube well in Rajbari village, North 24-Parganas district.

PB

*Patients, right, and widows, below, queue for assistance at Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Vrindaban*

